

Typography Primer

Exploring the Principles and Practice of Typography

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Introduction

This primer serves as an introduction to typography, exploring type, copyfitting, and standards. It is by no means an in-depth manual, nor an all inclusive survey into its rich history—for that I would recommend reading selected texts that dive deep into various aspects of the subject. Rather, it is meant to be a guide as you begin your exploration into working with type.

At its core, type is meant to clearly convey content in an accessible manner. Concepts such as legibility, readability, consistency, copyfitting, and proper character usage are fundamental principles one should understand and apply. Once the conventions of typography are learned an appreciation for proper application will develop. Also know that typography is much more than formal utility. There is an inherent aesthetic to type that, once discovered, becomes more than just properly set letters and words on a page. Type can be viewed as unique graphics in and of themselves, explored and applied for expressive purposes that reach beyond the expected.

Developed over millennia, through cultures and civilizations, a multitude of marks and symbols have been created to define meaning and convey message. Type is a refined collection of these symbols whose history is derived from written language. Type is combined to create words, and words to form phrases, recording visually what is expressed verbally.

The invention of movable type and the printing press altered the course of human history by providing a method for reproducing the written word through mechanical means. As the process of print reproduction developed, so did the stylistic representation of typographic characters. From cast metals and carved wood, to current methods of digital design, type creation is a specialized art form unique unto itself.

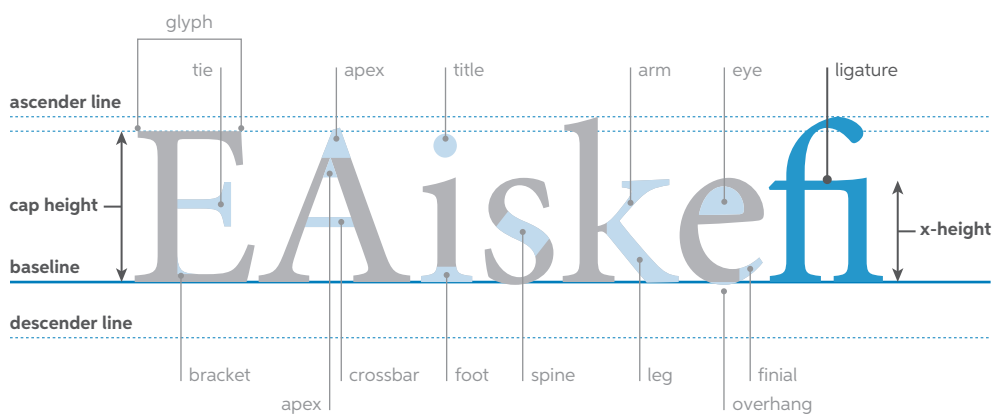
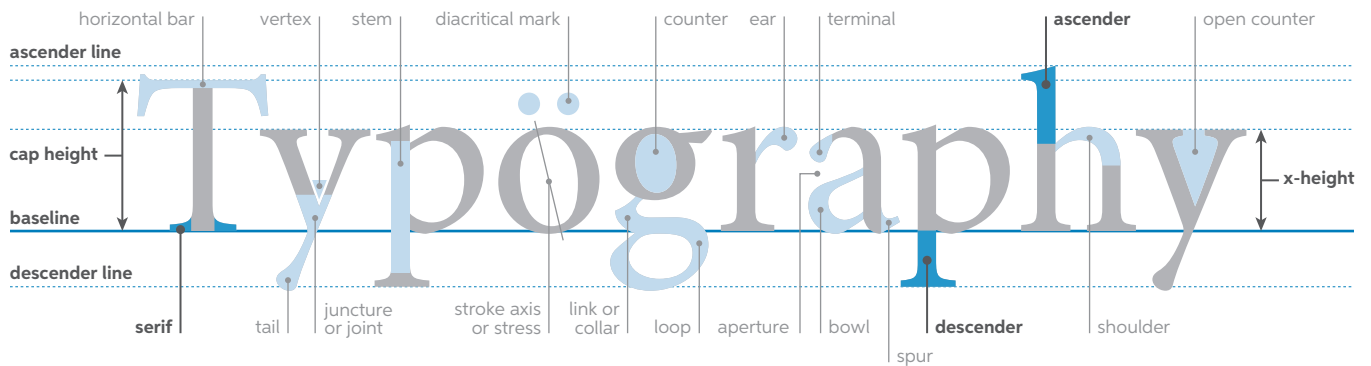
Whether utilitarian in purpose or beautiful in form, thoughtfully applied type does more than simply deliver a message, it has the ability to affect readers. It does so by clearly communicating content and artistically conveying meaning. As much as type is a product of human need and inventiveness, it is also an expression of our creative ability and aesthetic values.

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Anatomy of Type

By looking at the diagram below it may seem as if the design and construction of type is as complex as building a home. In many ways it is. Every attribute, feature, and stylistic nuance is carefully crafted to ensure that a font family—which can include thousands of characters and glyphs—reads its best at numerous point sizes, weights, and limitless applications. It may be years before a font is ready for distribution after it has been initially conceived.



KEY ATTRIBUTES

- Baseline
- Ascenders
- Descenders
- Cap height
- X-height
- Serif (Sans Serif)
- Ligatures
- Diacritical marks

Typefaces, Fonts, and Font Families

TYPEFACE

A typeface is a distinct design that fonts are derived from. An example would be the Helvetica Neue typeface below.

Helvetica Neue

FONTS

Fonts are styled after a typeface with varying attributes. The following fonts are based on the original Helvetica Neue typeface design.

Thin

Light Italic

Roman

Bold Outline

Black

Ultra Light Extended

Bold Extended Oblique

Black Extended

TYPEFACE OR FONT

Type designers refer to a font's design as a typeface, a holdover from when fonts were derived from typefaces that were handmade in steel and molded in lead. With the advent of computer typesetting, it has become common to refer to finding the best typeface for a design as selecting a font. Though generalizing the terminology, it is understood that what the user is attempting to do is select a font that suits their needs.

FONT FAMILY

A font family is a set of fonts with varying styles, weights, widths, sizes, and other attributes. Listed here is the complete Helvetica Neue font family, classified as a superfamily due to its size.

Helvetica Neue Thin

Helvetica Neue Thin Italic

Helvetica Neue Ultra Light

Helvetica Neue Ultra Light

Helvetica Neue Light

Helvetica Neue Light Italic

Helvetica Neue Roman

Helvetica Neue Italic

Helvetica Neue Medium

Helvetica Neue Medium Italic

Helvetica Neue Bold

Helvetica Neue Bold Outline

Helvetica Neue Bold Italic

Helvetica Neue Heavy

Helvetica Neue Heavy Italic

Helvetica Neue Black

Helvetica Neue Black Italic

Helvetica Thin Condensed

Helvetica Thin Condensed Oblique

Helvetica Neue Ultra Light Condensed

Helvetica Neue Ultra Light Condensed Oblique

Helvetica Neue Light Condensed

Helvetica Neue Light Condensed Oblique

Helvetica Neue Condensed

Helvetica Neue Condensed Oblique

Helvetica Neue Medium Condensed

Helvetica Neue Medium Condensed Oblique

Helvetica Neue Bold Condensed

Helvetica Neue Bold Condensed Oblique

Helvetica Neue Heavy Condensed

Helvetica Neue Heavy Condensed Oblique

Helvetica Neue Black Condensed

Helvetica Neue Black Condensed Oblique

Helvetica Neue Extra Black Condensed

Helvetica Neue Extra Black Condensed Oblique

Helvetica Thin Extended

Helvetica Thin Extended Oblique

Helvetica Neue Ultra Light Extended

Helvetica Neue Ultra Light Extended Oblique

Helvetica Neue Light Extended

Helvetica Neue Light Extended Oblique

Helvetica Neue Extended

Helvetica Neue Extended Oblique

Helvetica Neue Medium Extended

Helvetica Neue Medium Extended Oblique

Helvetica Neue Bold Extended

Helvetica Neue Bold Extended Oblique

Helvetica Neue Heavy Extended

Helvetica Neue Heavy Extended Oblique

Helvetica Neue Black Extended

Helvetica Neue Black Extended Oblique

Typeface Classifications

When the creation of page text transitioned from the handwriting of scribes to the printing press, the development of typefaces began. What was once based on a scrivener's ability to scribe neatly and legibly, became the work of typeface creators whose job it was to sculpt letters into metal. These metal letters were then used as punches to create molds in which printing press type was formed.

Over centuries typefaces developed from those that directly mimicked handwriting, such as blackletter, to those with a connection to handwritten scripts developed with readability in mind, such as serifs. With the advent of modernism came typefaces that clearly disassociated themselves with the past and paralleled the industrial revolution, such as sans serifs, which are derived from modernist philosophies and ideals.

The cycle repeated itself again with the digital revolution when typeface designers began developing fonts best suited for digital displays, desktop publishing and printing, and the internet. Today, typeface designers are looking toward the future at how fonts may be employed through the vast array of digital devices we interact with.

This page references the major type classifications and their attributes, some of which have histories dating back over five hundred years.

SERIF

Serif typefaces have slight projections that finish the strokes in their letterforms. These are named serifs.

Humansit Serif

Very calligraphic, with a consistent stress angles and moderate stroke contrast. Organic, often asymmetrical serifs with gradual brackets. Sample is set in *Garamond*. Other examples include *Adobe Jensen* and *Goudy Old Style*.

Transitional

Slightly calligraphic, with variable stress angles and moderate to high stroke contrast. Bracketed, abrupt serifs, bulbous terminals, and straight legs. Sample is set in *Baskerville*. Other examples include *Perpetua*, *Georgia*, and *Times*.

Modern

Consistent structure with vertical stress and a moderate to high stroke contrast. Thin, unbracketed serifs, ball terminals, and curved legs. Sample set in *Didot*. Other examples include *Bodoni* and *Walbaum*.

Contemporary

Styles vary but most have a large x-height, low stroke contrast, large chunky serifs, and very open apertures. Sample set in *Warnock*. Other examples include *Bembo* and *Neue Swift*.

Slab

Vertical stress and a moderate or no stroke contrast. Heavy, often unbracketed rectangular serifs and closed apertures. Sample set in *Rockwell*. Other examples include *Clarendon*, *Egyptienne*, and *ITC Lubalin Graph*.

Glyphic

Derived from hand-chiseled or engraved letters. Low stroke contrast with triangle or wedge-shaped serifs. Some have flared terminals. Sample set in *Albertus*. Other examples include *Newtext* and *Friz Quadrata*.

SANS SERIF

San serif typefaces do not include any projections at the end of the strokes in their letterforms.

Grotesque

Low stroke contrast that turn inward. Regular proportions and closed aperture. Round shapes are often oval and not circular. Uppercase characters contain spurs. Lower case 'g's are usually double storied. Sample set in *Franklin Gothic*. Other examples include *Grotesque MT* and *News Gothic*.

Neo-Grotesque

Similar to Grotesque but with less variation in forms. Minimal stroke contrast, normalized letter widths, closed apertures, and horizontal terminals. Round shapes are more circular. Lower case 'g's have open descenders. Sample set in *Helvetica Neue*. Other samples include *Univers* and *Arial*.

Gometric

Minimal or no stroke contrast with geometric based letterforms. Constructed with shapes that are nearly circular or square. Single story lower case 'a's. Sample set in *Futura*. Other examples include *Avenir*, *Avant Garde*, *Gotham*, and *Bank Gothic*.

Humanist Sans

Sans serif counterpart to Humanist serif. Calligraphic in structure, often with higher stroke contrast than other sans serifs. Sample set in *Lucida Grande*. Other examples include *Gill Sans* and *Verdana*.

Neo-Humanist Sans

Contemporary evolution of Humanist Sans with larger x-height, very open apertures, and Low to moderate stroke contrast. Sample set in *Frutiger*. Other examples include *Myriad* and *FF Meta*.

ADDITIONAL CLASSIFICATIONS

Many other typeface designs exist beyond serifs and sans serifs, each with unique histories of their own. Below are classifications for fonts common to every well rounded collection.

Formal Script

Based on the fluid, thick and thin stroked handwriting created with quill and fountain pens. Formal in appearance with flowing loops and flourishes, and consistent angles. Sample set in *Edwardian Script*.

Casual Script

Less rigid than formal scripts. Inspired by the many styles and methods used in hand lettering such as handwriting, brush, and graffiti. Sample set in *Brush Script*.

Blackletter

Evolved from the calligraphic writing style of the Middle Ages prior to the invention of the printing press and movable type. Characterized by high contrast, tight spacing, condensed lettering, and evenly spaced verticals. Sample set in *Goudy Text*.

Display

Display typefaces vary widely in appearance, and include both practical and novelty designs. They can be formal, fun, fanciful, or nostalgic. Sample set in *Braggadocio*.

Monospace

A non-proportional typeface in which each character has the same width and takes up the same amount of horizontal space on a page or display. Sample set in *Courier*.

Kerning, Tracking, and Scaling

KERNING

Kerning is the adjusted space between characters. When set correctly kerning creates consistent spacing in words, sentences, and paragraphs, avoiding odd breaks and gaps, and eases readability.

By design, kerning is determined by the font creator and applied via information stored within digital font files. Based on readability and design needs, kerning can be adjusted, though it is usually best to allow the font and design application to set the kerning. If needed, spacing between letters can be adjusted using tracking.

To the right are examples of kerning pairs. If studied closely, differences can be seen in spacing between sets even though they share the same letters. For example, notice the difference in space between the V and A, and the C and A.

TRACKING

Tracking allows for the manual adjustment of spacing between selected characters, words, sentences, and paragraphs. Tacking is useful when optically adjusting letters in words that begin to look awkward at larger post sizes, or when adjustments need to be made for proper copyfitting, e.g., avoiding orphans and widows (see page 10). Tracking can also be used to add visual interest to words under certain stylistic conditions. It is important to note that overuse of, or improperly applied, tracking can make type look loose, poorly set, and potentially unreadable.

To the right are examples of words with applied tracking. The first is the default tracking provided by the digital font file. The second has negative tracking overly applied (which can be just as detrimental when too much positive tracking is applied), and the third demonstrates a clean sans serif with stylistic tracking. The last example is a word at a larger point size requiring corrected tracking. Notice the difference between the original in gray and the adjusted word overlaid in blue.

SCALING

There may be times when the amount of copy provided is too lengthy to fit the available space. Or, perhaps, widening a word or phrase would balance nicely with an image or graphic. In either case it may be tempting to stretch or contract the text using an application's scale setting. With rare exception, it is advisable not to adjust a font's scaling. Or, if all other copyfitting techniques fail, perhaps scaling a paragraph of text a few percentage points may help. For example, scaling from the default of 100% to 97%. Do this cautiously because anything beyond a few percentage points will make the type look distorted. Just as a font designer works to develop the perfect kerning, so too do they create a font to look and read its best at its set width of 100%.

This is where fonts specifically designed for these conditions work well. Look for a compressed, condensed, or an extended typeface to use instead. The examples to the right demonstrate the distortion that occurs with overly scaled type, as well as condensed and extended variants of Helvetica Neue specifically created to look proportional at widths both narrow and wide.

VA CA Tz Hz ao yo

Variations in kerned pairs of letters

Letter Kerning

Properly kerned letters

Letter Kerning

Improperly kerned letters

Word Tracking

Properly tracked word

Word Tracking

Improperly tracked word

T Y P O G R A P H Y

Stylistic tracking

Typography

Adjusted tracking between letters when used at large point sizes

Typography

Overly applied horizontal or vertical scaling

Typography

Overly applied horizontal or vertical scaling

Helvetica Neue Condensed
Helvetica Neue Extended

Condensed and extended fonts designed to avoid scaling distortion

Quotes, Hyphens, Dashes, Ligatures, and Special Characters

✓ “Typography”

x "Typography"

Quote marks

✓ 24'6"

x 24'6"

Prime marks

✓ The Beginning. The End!

x The Beginning. The End!!!

Single space after period, one exclamation point

✓ Non-profit

x Non-profit

Hyphens

✓ Monday–Friday, 8:00AM–5:00PM

X Monday-Friday, 8:00am-5:00pm

En dash and small caps

✓ I talked to Mr. Johnson—my son's teacher—at the game on Friday.

X I talked to Mr. Johnson - my son's teacher - at the game on Friday.

Em dash

Th ct sp st fb ff ffb ffh ffi ffj ffl fft fh fi fj fk fl ft

Ligatures

á é ö û * † ‡ © ½ ½ ¢ £ ¥ ® ¨ ☼ ☼ ☼ ∞ → Φ Ш Ъ β θ Б ...

Special characters

Small Caps and Figure Styles

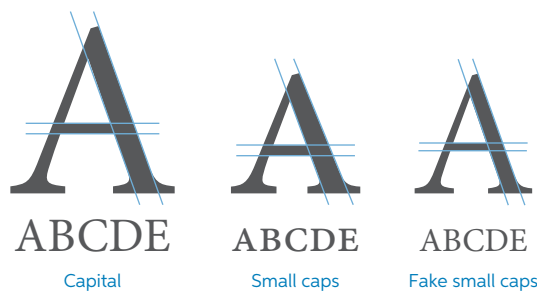
Small caps lead-in

DEVELOPED OVER MILLENNIA, THROUGH CULTURES AND CIVILIZATIONS, A MULTITUDE OF MARKS AND SYMBOLS HAVE BEEN CREATED TO DEFINE MEANING AND CONVEY MESSAGE.

Type is a refined collection of these symbols whose history is derived from written language. its primary function is to serve as a form of communication. type is combined to create words, and words to form phrases, recording visually what is expressed verbally.

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Extensively built fonts contain other features that provide specific styling attributes which may include small caps, and figure styles. Small caps are generally used as a lowercase variant, setting the text apart from the rest of the copy. What is unique about small cap figures is that they are designed to proportionally pair with the rest of the font. If a small cap is faked by reducing the point size of an uppercase character, a noticeable change in visual weight and balance can be seen. When small caps are desired, it is best to find a font that provides these specially designed letters.

The default design of numeral figures are created to match a font's cap height. This works well under certain circumstances, but isn't always the best styling choice. Proportional old style figures provide lowercase-like proportions for numbers and other special characters. When properly applied, proportional old style figures will make these characters visually consistent with surrounding text, such as in a paragraph. Tabular old style figures are similar to proportional old style figures with one extra attribute, they align vertically, aiding in the readability of numeric lists.

Drop cap with small caps lead-in

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Monday–Friday, 8:00AM–5:00PM

Small caps used for ante meridiem and post meridiem abbreviations

\$1,234.56 \$1,234.56 \$1,234.56

Default figure style

Proportional old style

Tabular old style

Item one	\$250.75
Item two	\$500.00
Item three	\$25.50
Item four	\$2,500.00
Item five	\$175.25
Total	\$3,451.50

Tabular old style figures (or lining numerals)
keep characters aligned vertically for ease of readability

The earliest printing press was constructed in 1439 by Johannes Gutenberg. His wooden press was capable of printing an average of 250 sheets of paper, per side, per hour. His invention varied little for more than 300 years, finally seeing new developments with the advent of the industrial revolution.

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Proportional old style figures versus default figures used in paragraph text

Alignment

ALIGN LEFT (RAG RIGHT)

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ALIGN CENTER

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ALIGN RIGHT (RAG LEFT)

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JUSTIFY, LAST LINE LEFT

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JUSTIFY, LAST LINE RIGHT

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FULL JUSTIFICATION

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STYLING AND COPYFITTING TEXT

Soon after we place new copy onto a page the process of styling begins. Styling represents the creative choices that bring text we work with to life. Part of this process is called copyfitting. In short, copyfitting ensures that bodies of text are well formatted and readable. There are various ways in which working with type can effect copyfitting, both good and bad, many of which will be covered on the following pages. One of the first decisions that might be made is how best to align text. The examples on this page demonstrate various alignment options. Deciding how to align text can vary from stylistic decisions to specification requirements. Also important to note, is that alignment is not specific to large blocks of text but can also be a creative way of working with just a few words or lines of copy.

Line Length

TOO LONG

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TOO NARROW

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READABLE LENGTH: ~50 TO 60 CHARACTERS

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An important aspect of proper copyfitting is line length. Long bodies of text slow reading speed and hinder comprehension. A reader will become weary attempting to stay focused across wide paragraphs. Returning to the margin and locating the next line also becomes difficult. Extremely narrow columns, with just a few words per line, also make for a challenging read as content is split into short discontinuous breaks. It has been determined that the optimal line length averages 50 to 60 characters, including spaces. There will be times when holding to this standard may not be possible, but avoiding extremes makes for a much smoother reading experience.

Leading, Paragraph Spacing, Rivers, and Word Gaps

AUTO LEADING

Whether utilitarian in purpose or beautiful in form, thoughtfully selected type does more than simply deliver a message, it has the ability to affect readers. It does so by clearly communicating content and artistically conveying meaning. As much as type is a product of human need and inventiveness, it is also an expression of our creative ability and aesthetic values.

LEADING SET TO FONT SIZE

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LEADING SPACED FOR STYLE AND READABILITY

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RIVERS, AND WORD GAPS

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NO STYLING

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SPACING AND LEADING

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When styling multiple paragraphs, differentiating one from another is an important aspect of readability.

Paragraph spacing—extra space that separates one paragraph from the following—is a great way to create a break. An additional way to improve readability is by adding line spacing between rows of text. This is called leading. Leading at its default size, or set to the font's point size, tends to be overly tight. Adding some space between lines opens up a paragraph providing much needed room for the eye to follow from one line to the next. Creatively applied leading can also make for a nice stylistic touch.

A word of caution when flowing copy into a design. As columns become narrower, gaps may appear between words. Or, worse yet, gaps can accumulate from one line to the next causing rivers that run vertically through a paragraph. Fine tuning copy with tracking can alleviate these issues. If in doubt, try the blur test, it never fails.

THE BLUR TEST



Widows, Orphans, and Hyphenation

WIDOWS AND ORPHANS

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Whether utilitarian in purpose or beautiful in form, thoughtfully selected type does more than simply deliver a message, it has the ability to affect readers. It does so by clearly communicating content and artistically conveying meaning. It sets a tone, expresses emotion, and reflects personality. It has the power to command attention and cause disruption, or, in turn, speak softly and create harmony. As much as type is a product of human need and inventiveness, it is also an expression of our creative ability and aesthetic values.

HYPHENATION TEXT

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NON-HYPHENATED TEXT

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Two other issues that can occur when setting text are widows and orphans. Orphans are single words that remain behind, alone on their own line at the end of a paragraph. Not only can these words be missed by the reader, they also make for overly spaced gaps between paragraphs. Also disruptive to reading are widows. Widows are single lines of text from the beginning or end of a paragraph left behind or pushed to the start of a following column or page. Adjusting the tracking, leading, and paragraph spacing can help eliminate these typographical errors.

Hyphenation is a common method of smoothing the flow of copy in long-form text, such as in books, and in tightly spaced columns found in magazines and newspapers. Though hyphenation serves these purposes well, when designing with copy it is best to avoid hyphenation. Instead, rely on the copyfitting methods previously mentioned. Not only are hyphens unsightly on a well designed page, the continual breaks in words disrupt readability.

Indents and Tabs

TABBED LIST

Serif

- Subclasses:
 - Antique
 - Clarendon
 - Didone
 - Dutch Old Style
 - Egyptian
 - French Clarendon
 - French Old Style
 - Grecian
 - Geometric Serif
 - Latin
 - Modern
 - Old Style
 - Scotch Modern
 - Scotch Roman
 - Slab Serif
 - Spur Serif
 - Spanish Old Style
 - Transitional
 - Tuscan
 - Venetian Old Style

Sans Serif

- Subclasses:
 - Gothic
 - Grotesque
 - Geometric Sans
 - Grotesk
 - Humanist Sans
 - Square Gothic
 - Swiss Gothic

Blackletter

- Subclasses:
 - Fraktur
 - Old English
 - Rotunda
 - Schwabacher
 - Textura

Decorative

- Subclass:
 - Art Deco
 - Art Nouveau
 - Comic Strip Lettering
 - Distressed
 - Futuristic
 - Pseudo Foreign Script
 - Victorian

Digital

- Subclass:
 - Dot Matrix
 - Machine Readable
 - Monospace
 - Pixel

PARAGRAPH TABS

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HANGING INDENTS

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PARAGRAPH INDENTS

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As mentioned, tabs are a familiar way of creating breaks between paragraphs. But, tabs play a much broader roll in the creation of lists. For example, the list on this page was created using bullets, tabs, and indented tabs. A second example can be found in the tabular list on page seven, where right aligned tabs with dot leaders are used to create a justified column of financial sums. The introduction page also uses tabs to create the table of contents.

Tabbed indents may be common to paragraph breaks, but there are a variety of other forms of indentation, such as numerical and hanging indents. When to use indents will depend the task at hand. What is important is understanding how to create them with the tab tools provided in design applications, and when and how to appropriately use them in a layout.

Headings and Subheadings

Paragraph Heading

PARAGRAPH SUBHEAD

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List Subhead

- List item one in a tabbed bulleted list
- List item two in a tabbed bulleted list
- List item three in a tabbed bulleted list
- List item four in a tabbed bulleted list
- List item five in a tabbed bulleted list

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Headings and subheadings play an important role delineating content within paragraphs of copy. Headings are used as introductions to entire section of text, while subheads separate the content into the subsections within. The example on this page demonstrated both, with the addition of a tertiary subhead used to title a bulleted list.

Readability

BAD READABILITY

Type as Image

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TYPE AS IMAGE

DEVELOPED OVER MILLENNIA, THROUGH CULTURES AND CIVILIZATIONS, A MULTITUDE OF MARKS AND SYMBOLS HAVE BEEN CREATED TO DEFINE MEANING AND CONVEY MESSAGE. TYPE IS A REFINED COLLECTION OF THESE SYMBOLS WHOSE HISTORY IS DERIVED FROM WRITTEN LANGUAGE. ITS PRIMARY FUNCTION IS TO SERVE AS A FORM OF COMMUNICATION. TYPE IS COMBINED TO CREATE WORDS, AND WORDS TO FORM PHRASES, RECORDING VISUALLY WHAT IS EXPRESSED VERBALLY. THE INVENTION OF MOVABLE TYPE AND THE PRINTING PRESS ALTERED THE COURSE OF HUMAN HISTORY BY PROVIDING A METHOD FOR REPRODUCING THE WRITTEN WORD THROUGH MECHANICAL MEANS. AS THE PROCESS OF PRINT REPRODUCTION DEVELOPED, SO DID THE STYLISTIC REPRESENTATION OF TYPOGRAPHIC CHARACTERS. FROM CAST METALS AND CARVED WOOD, TO CURRENT METHODS OF DIGITAL DESIGN, THE ACT OF TYPE CREATION IS A SPECIALIZED ART FORM UNIQUE UNTO ITSELF.

TYPE AS IMAGE

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GOOD READABILITY

Type as Image

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In the end, proper copyfitting is about readability. Special characters, spacing, alignment—along with other best practices—allow for clearly set and engaging text. This page provides examples of appropriate alternatives to copy set with poor readability, such as text with no clear division between paragraphs, and long bodies of text set in all uppercase. For example, notice how a thin typeface is more difficult to read when reversed off a dark background than the regular weight typeface from the same font family.

Grouping, Alignment, AND Hierarchy

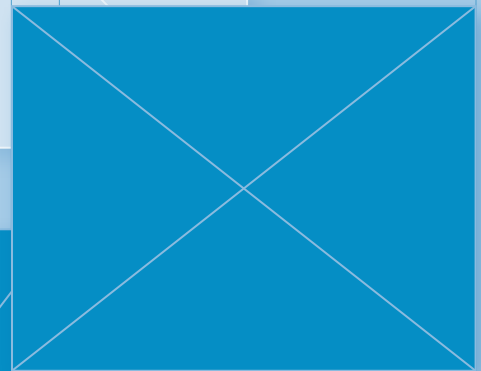
At its core type is meant to clearly convey content in an accessible manner. Concepts such as legibility, readability, consistency, copyfitting, and proper character usage are fundamental principles one should understand and apply. Once the conventions of typography are learned an appreciation for proper application will develop. Also know that typography is much more than formal utility. There is an inherent aesthetic to type that, once discovered, becomes more than just properly set letters and words on a page. Type can be viewed as unique graphics in and of themselves, explored and applied for expressive purposes that reach beyond the expected.

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TYPE AS IMAGE

AS
IMAGE

Finally...

Once the standards of typography are understood and applied, creative expression follows. What at first may seem like a perfectionist's playground is actually an opportunity to explore possibilities. The previous two pages provide layout examples that, despite adhering to common typographic and compositional standards, demonstrate a dynamism, proving that what at first may seem like a chore can be an opportunity for creative expression. Remember to play by the rules but, when appropriate, also allow yourself to bend and even break them. As much as typography is a concise practice, it is also an opportunity to visually express content through dynamic typographic means.