

STEVE CAPLIN'S **A** TO **Z** OF DESIGN

T: Typography

Steve Caplin walks us alphabetically through the concepts essential to success for any jobbing or aspiring designer.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Typography is the art of choosing the right typeface with which to convey information, and of arranging the words on the page to their best effect. The modern designer has hundreds of typefaces to choose from, and selecting the right one for the job is of paramount importance.

Typefaces fall into two broad categories: serif and sans serif. The word 'serif' refers to the tiny lines at the ends of strokes, found in typefaces such as Times, Baskerville and Garamond. These originated with Roman stonemasons, who found that if they attempted to carve a thick character, such as the letter I, there was a danger of the stone splitting. To prevent this, they first carved thin lines at the top and bottom of the character to act as stoppers. These lines, the serifs, would stop the thick strokes they carved later continuing too far.

This isn't the only advantage of serifs, as it was found that these thin lines formed a kind of horizontal rule at the top and bottom of the letters, which helped to guide the eye along the printed page. The earliest

examples of modern typography followed these Roman letter forms to aid legibility. Garamond, one of the earliest examples, is still in use today.

When the early Victorians started churning out posters to advertise plays and other events, they thickened the type to produce 'Egyptian' or slab serif letter forms. But the serifs took up too much space, reducing the size at which they could print the type. This led to the development of sans serif lettering (from the French for 'without'), which enabled printers to use larger sizes and increased legibility from a distance. Initially called 'Gothic' – in the sense of 'vandalistic' – these typefaces were initially considered too ugly for all but the most garish headlines.

Today, serif typefaces are used for extended passages in print: most books and newspapers, and almost all magazines, set their body copy in a serif face. Sans serif is often considered just too difficult to read in large chunks. The trouble is that serif type takes up more space and needs to be

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ERIC GILL (1882-1940)

▲ 01 Typographic matter can be used to break up text in place of graphic elements – such as this quote from Eric Gill. But make sure hyphenation is turned off – it looks ugly and ungainly with small amounts of centred text.

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▲ 02 The appearance is improved with hyphenation turned off. But the top and bottom lines of the quote look unbalanced: the 'T' in the first line is above the 'd' in the line below, but the 'a' at the end of the first line overhangs the next line, with awkward results.

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▲ 03 Using Hanging Punctuation places the quotation marks outside the body of the text. Now the type looks correctly centred. That single word ‘of’ at the end of the fifth line is hanging in space. With nothing above or below it, the effect is unbalanced.

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▲ 04 By changing to Adobe Every Line Composer, the line breaks are arranged to create a more even spread of words in each line. There are no instances where a whole word appears to be separated from the rest of the text.

In reading, for example, the enunciation of a proposition, we are apt to fancy, that for every word contained in it, there is an idea presented to the understanding; from the combination and comparison of which ideas, results that act of the mind called judgement.
 So different is all this from the fact, that our words, when examined separately, are often as completely insignificant as the letters of which they are composed; deriving their meaning solely from the connection, or relation, in which they stand to others.
 Dugald Stewart (1753-1828)

▲ 05/06 For long passages of text, sans serif type produces a result that’s difficult to read. Setting the same text in a serif font makes it easier on the eye, because the serifs create the effect of rules above and below the characters, helping the reader to follow each line of text.

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7.00 News and weather
 7.30 The Simpsons
 8.00 World’s Greatest Disasters: an amusing look at how close we nearly came to Armageddon
 8.30 All Aboard! Reality show set in a submarine beneath the arctic ocean, hosted by Graham Norton
 9.00 Heavens Above! Reality show set in a hot air balloon, hosted by Graham Norton
 10.00 News and weather
 10.30 Local news
 10.35 Hot Stuff! Disaster show set in an active volcano, hosted by Graham Norton

▲ 07/08 When used to convey information, a serif typeface takes up too much space and can look awkward in narrow columns. The same text set in a sans serif face can be printed much smaller, with the same degree of legibility – which means more words will fit in.

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The letters of the alphabet, the characters of a typeface, are building blocks. Besides being symbols to construct a written language, they can be used to compose any visual impression imaginable. To me, typography is the visual arrangement of letterforms and symbols. Its style creates identity. If the composition contains coherent content, this visual identity will convey the message in a distinct and original way. A new expression. A new impression. A new corner of the mind is opened. How exciting!

Max Kisman (1953-)

▲ 09/10 A common mistake is to increase the size of the type in an attempt to make it more legible. But when type is set too close, it’s harder to read. A better solution is to reduce the size and increase the leading. This takes up the same amount of space but improves legibility.

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printed larger for legibility. When conveying information that is intended to be dipped into rather than read at length, sans serif faces are more suitable and enable designers to squeeze the information into a far smaller space. As a result newspapers use sans serif faces for financial information, television listings, weather reports and so on.

One of the first truly modern sans serif faces was created by Edward Johnston in 1915 for the London Underground. The need was for a face that was legible and unambiguous from a distance – and London Underground still uses this typeface, Johnston, today. All road signs, which have much the same requirements, are in a similar face. To an extent, those in general use – from the regular, geometric Univers and Futura, to the more ‘humanist’, looser Gill and Optima – all owe their existence to Johnston.

Typefaces can be modern or old-fashioned, formal or relaxed; the choice depends on the context. When *The Guardian* launched its new design back in 1988, designer Dave Hillman took a radical step with its masthead, setting ‘The’ in Garamond Italic (serif), and ‘Guardian’ in Helvetica Black, a contemporary extra-bold sans. By mixing the old with the new, and the formal with the informal, *The Guardian* was making a definite statement about both its new approach and its heritage. Now, after the more recent redesign two years ago, both words are in lower case, run together and differentiated by different colours – a masthead for the internet age.

The arrangement of type on the page is as important as the choice of typeface. In *Illustrator* and *InDesign*, Adobe provides a useful set of tools for balancing type. These include hanging punctuation (or ‘optical margin alignment’), in which the punctuation is set outside the main block of text to create a greater visual balance. Also of interest is the Adobe Every Line Composer, a method of balancing spacing across multiple lines to create the best balance. Our visual examples on this page show how these techniques are used in practice.

One of the errors that novice designers often make is to set type too large in the mistaken belief that this increases legibility. It’s generally far more effective to reduce the type size and to increase the leading – the space between the lines. (The name is taken from the strips of lead that compositors used to place between lines of type.) In part, the error is a result of designing wholly on screen: while 12pt Lucida Grande may be the most legible typeface for on-screen editing, it looks far too big and clumsy in print.