

Top ten tips for typography

A rather nasty 'ten commandments of typography' infographic prompted me to think about what might be more useful for designers needing to work with type. This quick runthrough aims to highlight the relevant issues and shed light on the considerations that can help you find answers.

Type systems

A type system is like a colour scheme: there are no laws about which colours are best or worst or how many colours are too many, but pick them well and everything will click. Picking a palette of typefaces needs to be done based on the needs of the text. Text with many levels of hierarchy and emphasis will need a broader, more complex range of styles to effectively signal the different levels.

Each font you use needs an identifiable role or function on the page. Ask yourself, what is the work this font is doing? If a reader can see what the change of fonts signifies, scanning and comprehension will be easier.

Picking the right font

It makes sense to pick your body text font first, since that will have to work the hardest, and needs to have the right tone of voice for the words it's conveying. If setting long stretches of text, remember that the overall texture is a result of the repeated occurrence of many tiny details, so check how your intended font looks in text blocks, not just looking at zoomed-in shapes.

Use fonts you like. Bookmark foundries' websites and stay up-to-date with their releases.

Feel free to semi-ignore people who tell you serif fonts are more readable than sans serif ones. I recently enjoyed reading a novel entirely set in Frutiger. I think readability is more about the internal rhythm of paragraphs and unambiguous wordshapes or letterforms than about stylistic details.

Combining fonts

Finding fonts that work well together can be hard. Type superfamilies with an abundance of styles can be a good trick in situations that need a high degree of consistency; conversely, uniform letter structures across a family can look too rigid and produce a somewhat plain effect overall. For headings, a contrasting font can add visual interest and set it off from the text better. Look around you and try to see what works or doesn't work in the text you read.

Typeface styles

Explore a typeface's different styles. Try out the different weights, italics and small capitals to see how they complement each other and what they could be used for. Do all of the weights work equally well at small and large sizes? Explore the OpenType features.

Character set

Different projects will need fonts with different capabilities. A tourist guidebook might need arrows and bullets, whilst a dissertation might need superior figures for referencing. Knowing what characters a font has will save time choosing and using it. Open the glyph palette or character map and see what's there. If there are small capital numerals (Nº) or tabular lining figures, the type designer has put them there for a reason. If you don't know what things are for, find out and use them when appropriate.

Learn about en-dashes, em-dashes, hyphens, em-spaces, thin spaces and hair spaces. Figure out your preferences on how and when to use them.

Page layout

Remember fonts are just one aspect of typography. Page layout and typesetting require attention to be paid to where the type appears and how it reads. Use proper page-layout software so you can define master pages, margins, character styles and paragraph styles (and learn how to use them). Text should not do unexpected things halfway through, so set up a baseline grid throughout your document to make sure things line up. Don't be afraid of breaking the grid when you need to (for headlines and images for example).

Setting paragraphs

Play around with font size, line length and linespacing (leading) until paragraphs look like paragraphs. What does that mean? Think about what size of type people are used to reading in different environments. What's a comfortable number of words per line? How far does the eye have to travel to reach the

start of the next line? How ragged or even are the paragraph shapes? Tweaking these will determine whether text looks inviting to read or not. Don't be afraid of fractional point sizes.

See whether hyphenating words makes your text look better or worse. The breaks will even out the line lengths and may allow more text to fit on the page, but can result in lots of unsightly word fragments.

Non-paragraph text

If setting tables or narrow columns, word-breaks can become a problem, so keep tweaking column widths, gutters, cell margins and font size until you find the most comfortable way to fit everything together. Text in tables can be oriented vertically if needed.

If setting headings, don't let them float away from the text: it needs to be clear what they are leading into. Have a logical hierarchy of styles to indicate levels of subheadings.

Space

The use of space around text indicates the order different bits should be read in. It illuminates the relationships between ideas on the page. How should this text be read? Which bits belong together? The different kinds of space — margins, line spacing, paragraph breaks, tabs, different kinds of justification, gutters and indents — are all tools at your disposal and can be employed to mean different things. Use them consistently to organise and articulate the text.

Break lines for sense. Keep words that are semantically linked together. Break paragraphs carefully to avoid widows and orphans. When appropriate, re-word sentences to fit the space available.

Letter spacing

Text at sizes less than 8pt may benefit from increased tracking (letterspacing).

If kerning isn't on by default, switch it on. Don't use InDesign's optical spacing unless you're forced to use a font with bad built-in spacing. In very tight spaces, manually reduce the tracking or kerning between letters.