

The Right Type

by Cynthia Pinsonnault

Good typography is an art. There is a lot to know about type, from typeface design, to using appropriate typefaces, to learning typesetting rules and conventions. I could write about type for the rest of the year and still have more to tell you.

Technology's Influence

As computers have rapidly taken over the task of typesetting, everyone, including the designer, has had to learn typesetting rules and conventions in order for their printed work to look its best. And now the World Wide Web has come along to challenge all of it. I don't if I will ever feel like I know all there is to know about type.

T Y P E Should Be Read and Not Seen

In his book, *Using Type Right*, author Philip Brady writes "*Designing with type means controlling all the visual signals so how a typeset piece looks reinforces what it says.*"

The typeface chosen; the size of type; placement on the page; letter, word, line and paragraph spacing; white space; type and page color; alignment — everything — help to create the visual effect and get your message to the reader.

When an illustrator or photographer puts a great image on a page, it's often the first thing we notice. But when a typographer sets beautiful, perfect type, we may never notice it. In fact, if you find yourself noticing the type instead of the message, that is bad typesetting. I've seen lots of examples of this, where the use of type is so creative that the message becomes secondary or there is no message. If the goal is fun and beautiful art, and if we're going to frame and hang it on the wall, then fine. That's the end of the discussion.

But, type is meant to be read. And usually, our goal is to use type to assist communication. Grammar plays a part in this, along with the type. The two should work together to make reading easy, even pleasurable. The best use of grammar is to clarify

meaning in the message. The best use of type is to create a mood and support or enhance the message while maintaining legibility (easy recognition of words).

CLARIFYING Meaning

The consistent use of standard grammar and typography help clarify meaning. I think most of us agree that consistency in grammar helps us bring out the meaning in what otherwise would just be a long series of words. We break essays into paragraphs, paragraphs into sentences, and sentences into phrases. We spell words the same way every time. We start sentences with capital letters and end them with periods, and in between we strive to get the commas and semicolons in the right spots.

Similarly, with type, we want letters to be clearly formed and legible. Even a novelty font used to create a mood must be readable. A beautiful typeface, used improperly, can look terrible. Badly set type makes it difficult to discern the words. Enough struggling to decode bad type, and the reader will move on.

TWO RULES for Better Type

Number One:

I can think of no good reason to set body copy in all caps. Even in headlines, all caps type should be limited. A little goes a long way. This goes double if you are using a script typeface.

We recognize words primarily by the shape they create. We learned and are conditioned to read most easily lowercase letterforms with moderately thick and thin elements and serifs (the little crosslines at the end of strokes). All caps type has a uniform rectangular shape, forcing us to look at each letter to determine what the word is. This slows reading and requires more effort on the reader's part.

Try this experiment from *Using Type Right*. "Take a sheet of paper and cover the bottom half of the letters in several words. What can you read? Try this experiment with a line of upper- and lowercase letters and with one having only caps. Repeat the action,

but this time allow only the base of the letters to show. Again, can you read the words? How readily? All the parts of a letter, including the serifs, are important to legibility, but the tops seem relatively more important."

Number Two:

Be careful when mixing multiple typefaces.

Using different typefaces can help the reader differentiate between elements. Related copy or elements can be set using one typeface while other elements are set in a different typeface. But this takes practice. Each typeface sends a different message. Overdoing this or selecting typefaces that do not coordinate well, can create the exact opposite effect, making things more confusing for the reader.

If you're new to typesetting or unsure of how to combine typefaces, try using a typeface family that has several weights and variations designed to work together. Adobe Garamond is a good example of this. The family extends to italics, condensed and expert versions, which are all easily combined with pretty good results.

M O R E to Say

These are just a few ideas of how to make your type look better and work harder. If you would like more design, marketing, advertising, and Website tips and advice, visit <http://www.ballyhoo-blog.com> or go to <http://www.pinscreative.com> and join our mailing list to get our Flourish Newsletter.

Or, you might enjoy browsing the thousands of typefaces available online. Check my recommendation for the font site I use most: <http://www.pinscreative.com/tools.htm>.

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