

Writing in Type:

The Art of Choosing Typefaces that Work

By MICHAEL OPSTEEGH, Senior Member



Why should technical communicators care about typography when our jobs revolve around transforming technical data into readable and usable information for a specific audience? Because typography actually has dramatic effects on readability. You can create perfect copy and supporting charts, graphs, and illustrations, and yet the reader will not be able to use your carefully crafted information if the type is inappropriate, inaccessible, or uninviting.

The concept of making information inviting has been around for ages. One of Aristotle's five canons of rhetoric was *delivery*. Aristotle's concept of delivery referred to the speaker's facial expressions, gestures, and vocal intonations. To technical communicators, delivery, as a rhetorical device, refers to document design, including the format of tables and figures, indentation, and typography.

Technical communicators must, therefore, possess a basic knowledge of type design to help master the delivery of their documents. For example, you may already subscribe to the principle that sans serif typefaces are easier to read on screen while serif typefaces are easier to read on paper. This basic tenet is a great starting point but should not be the extent of your knowledge of typography.

Importance of Type

Except for certain situations within graphic design, type's main purpose is balancing the readability and legibility of your message. Your type should always be appealing and inviting to the reader. Text consisting of decorative fonts or clashing typefaces turns your reader off. Your use of typography can directly affect whether a potential reader even bothers to look at your document.

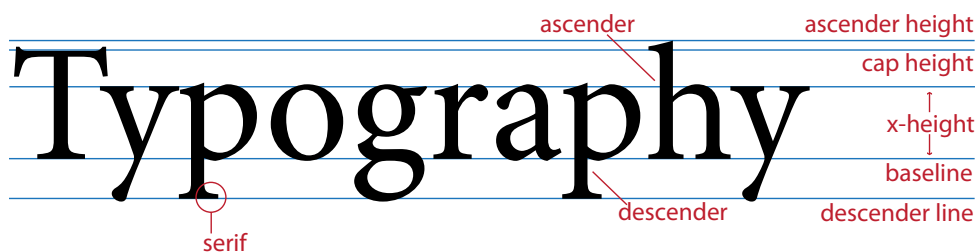
Looks aside, bad typography can obscure the meaning or tone of your message. When the message of your résumé, for example, is "hire me," you want your message to be as clear as possible. By the same token, stunning typography won't land you a job if the content of your résumé doesn't adequately match your skills to the employer's desired qualifications or if your résumé is poorly laid out.

You should devote some time to finessing the type in your manuals, interactive help, web pages, annual reports, proposals, white papers, and whatever else you may be writing. All your documents and projects should be pleasant to look at and innovative enough to attract and hold your readers' attention. After all, type is all around us on billboards, signs, web pages, cell phones, and television, and your documents are competing against all of these media for your readers' eyes.

Key concepts that are specific to typography include x-height, leading, and kerning.

X-height

The x-height of a typeface is the measurement from the baseline to the median (the height of a lowercase *x*). You may have noticed that the x-height varies from font to font. If you haven't noticed, don't worry, we'll examine some examples later. Fonts with larger x-heights require more line spacing.



▲ **The basic anatomy of type.** Understanding a few fundamentals is essential to understanding how type works. Pay close attention to the x-height, the height of ascenders, and the depth of descenders. The typeface used is Adobe Minion Pro.

Type Basics

Typography, like many art forms, is relatively subjective. Understanding the basic principles, however, will help you train your eyes to appreciate the subtle qualities of good typography:

- **Contrast.** Headings and body text should provide sufficient contrast.
- **Repetition.** Typographic elements should provide sufficient repetition to aid the reader's ability to quickly navigate your text.
- **Alignment.** Your text should be aligned with other elements of the page.
- **Proximity.** Elements of type that belong together should be in relatively close proximity when compared to elements that don't belong together.

For a thorough rundown on contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity, refer to Robin Williams's *The Non-Designer's Design Book*, which should occupy a prominent place in every technical communicator's library.

Leading

Leading is the space between lines of type. Technically, leading is measured from baseline to baseline. The default leading is approximately 120 percent of the point size of the type. For example, 12-point type would be set with a leading of 14.4 points (written as 12/14.4). The default isn't always appropriate because, in addition to type size, you must also consider x-height and line length. I can't offer a formula for determining the amount of line spacing required for comfortable reading; it's a matter of aesthetics. As you consider the proper line spacing, take the following factors into account:

- **Font Size.** Normal text of 10 to 12 points is generally set with one to two points of line spacing. Smaller fonts require more line spacing to be legible. Likewise, large heading or display type will likely require less leading in proportion to the text size.
- **X-height.** X-height is the distance between the baseline and median of

lowercase letters. The larger the x-height, the more leading is required because the reader needs more space to recognize the word shapes.

- **Line Length.** Longer lines of text require more line space to prevent the eye from reading the same line twice. Lines of 75 characters or more should be double-spaced. Keep your body text between 35 and 70 characters for easy reading.

Kerning

Kerning is the space between two characters. Depending on the shapes of the characters, if they look like puzzle pieces that fit together, they may need to be “scooped” closer together to create a more even text color. By *text color*, I mean the gray that body text creates on the page when glanced at from afar. Glaring white spaces between characters can distract the reader. Kerning reduces those white spaces. Proper kerning is a tedious task, so you may want to focus

unkerned type

Type

kerned type

Type

▲ **Kerning.** Kerning is the adjustment of space between two letters. Kerning is intended to make the space between letters even. In the example above, the first instance in not kerned while the second is. Notice the T and the Y fit more closely together in the kerned type. The typeface used is Adobe Caslon.

To be, or not to be: that is the question: | 12 pts
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, | 15 pts
 And by opposing end them?
 leading

▲ **Type size and leading.** The point size of type is measured from roughly the bottom of the descenders to the top of the ascenders. The leading is the amount of space between lines of type and is measured from baseline to baseline. The example below is 12-point type set on 15-point leading (or 12/15). The typeface used is High Tower.

any manual adjustments on heading or key text.

Readability and Legibility

Readability and legibility are very similar terms and are often confused because they seem to mean the same thing. The two terms, however, are related only as much as a sprint is related to a marathon: they both involve running. Readability and legibility both involve the appropriateness and the effectiveness of type.

Readability refers to the type’s ability to attract and hold the reader’s attention. Readability is what makes us take notice of text and want to read more. The more interesting the type, however, the more you risk sacrificing legibility.

Legibility refers to the ease with which type can be read and the capacity for word shapes to be easily recognized. Legible type must not interrupt the reader or cause his or her eyes to stray.

It’s important to understand the differences between readable type and leg-

Readable Type
Legible Type

▲ **Readability versus legibility.** Readable type catches the reader’s eyes and invites them to read. Legible type enables the reader to read with ease. You must find a balance between readability and legibility or managers will not be enticed to read your documents or read enough of them. The typefaces used here are Porcelain and Times New Roman.

ible type when designing your documents. Your heading type should be highly readable. It must grab the reader’s attention and make the structure of your document immediately apparent and familiar. The reader isn’t going to spend much time reading heading text, so it’s acceptable to sacrifice some measure of legibility. Once the reader is hooked and knee-deep in your body text, the type should be highly legible, easy to read, and provide no barrier to communication.

Type Styles

There are, perhaps, hundreds of thousands of computerized typefaces to choose from. All of these typefaces can be a bit overwhelming, especially to the untrained eye. Fortunately, you can categorize most typefaces into one of seven groups; granted, some typefaces will never easily fit into one category or another.

Like fashion, type styles have changed over time. Most type styles are derived from the time or place in which they were developed and gained popularity. Having said that, many typefaces that fit within a certain style may have been created outside of the time or place of origin typically associated with that type style. You can categorize most typefaces in one of the following seven type styles:

- Old Style Garamond
- Transitional Baskerville
- Modern Bodoni
- Slab Serif Rockwell
- Sans Serif Helvetica
- Script Swing
- Decorative Jokerman

▲ **Type styles.** Typefaces can be categorized into styles. Learning the different styles can help you choose suitable type for your résumé or other documents.

Typeface styles are evocative. They're reminiscent of the time and place in which they were created because they embody the art and architecture of the time and place of origin. Choose typefaces based on their associated mood and tone and find the ones that suit the tone of your document.

About Fonts

A *font* is the entire collection of characters, punctuation, numerals, and glyphs of a typeface. Traditionally, a font was the collection of characters of a single size of one typeface. With computers, fonts aren't size-dependent, and the term is often used to refer to the file that holds the collection of characters.

Many of the software packages that we install on our computers contain collections of fonts that are perfectly suitable for our documents. Operating systems like Microsoft Windows and Apple Mac OS, and software suites like Microsoft Office and Adobe Creative Suite, contain dozens of fonts. Check out the fonts you already have installed on your computer.

Don't steal fonts. A font file is the culmination of a lot of hard work by a type designer. Fonts are intellectual property, so don't borrow or steal them.

Be careful when downloading free fonts. Although there are many cool-looking freebie fonts available online, many of them contain only the basic character sets and may not contain all the measurements required for proper kerning. Additionally, installing a corrupt font file can cause your software applications or operating system to crash. If you're running Mac OS X, you can use the Font Book utility to verify that your font files are not corrupt. If you're running Windows, there are several commercial font-management utilities you can buy.

If you can, use OpenType fonts. OpenType is the latest standard developed by Adobe and Microsoft. OpenType fonts are cross-platform (meaning a single font file will work on all major operating systems), contain vastly expanded character sets, and contain such advanced typographic features as old-style numbering, real fractions, real small caps, and additional ligatures. If you can't find an OpenType font that suits you, use a TrueType font instead.

Headings

Body type

Captions

▲ **Myriad Pro.** Myriad Pro Bold, Regular, and Condensed are included with Adobe Creative Suite 4.

Headings

Body type

Captions

▲ **Franklin Gothic.** Franklin Gothic Heavy, Book, and Medium Condensed are included with Microsoft Office 2007 and Office Mac 2008.

Headings

Body type

▲ **Gill Sans MT and Adobe Garamond Pro.** Gill Sans MT Regular is included with Microsoft Office 2007 and Office Mac 2008. Adobe Garamond Pro Regular is included with Adobe Creative Suite 4.

Headings

Body type

▲ **Constantia and Verdana.** Constantia Bold is included with Microsoft Office 2007 and Office Mac 2008. Verdana Regular is included with Microsoft Windows 7 and Apple Mac OS X 10.6.

Headings

Body type

Captions

▲ **Gill Sans MT.** Gill Sans MT Bold, Regular, and Condensed are included with Microsoft Office 2007 and Office Mac 2008.

Headings

Body type

▲ **Bell Gothic and Bell MT.** Bell Gothic Std Black is included with Adobe Creative Suite 4. Bell MT Regular is included with Microsoft Office 2007.

Headings

Body type

▲ **Myriad Pro and Adobe Caslon Pro.** Myriad Pro Semibold and Adobe Caslon Pro are included with Adobe Creative Suite 4.

HEADINGS

Body type

▲ **Copperplate Gothic and Georgia.** Copperplate Gothic Bold is included with Microsoft Office 2007. Georgia Regular is included with Microsoft Windows 7 and Apple Mac OS X 10.6.

Headings

Body type

Captions

▲ **Helvetica Neue.** Helvetica Neue Condensed Bold, Regular, and Light are included with Apple Mac OS X 10.6.

Headings

Body type

▲ **Rockwell and Chaparral Pro.** Rockwell Bold is included with Microsoft Office 2007. Chaparral Pro Regular is included with Adobe Creative Suite 4.

Headings

Body type

▲ **Bodini and Calibri.** Bodini MT Bold is included with Microsoft Office 2007. Calibri Regular is included with Microsoft Office 2007 and Office Mac 2008.

Headings

Body type

▲ **Futura and Adobe Garamond Pro.** Futura Medium is included with Apple Mac OS X 10.6. Adobe Garamond Pro Regular is included with Adobe Creative Suite 4.

Choosing Type Combinations

Selecting the perfect typeface for the occasion can be a tedious task. Selecting a combination of two or three typefaces that suit the occasion and work well together can be downright frustrating.

There are several type families that are diverse enough that you could use one family and still have enough contrast to make your documents stand out. Three reliable standbys include Gill Sans, Helvetica, and Myriad; I know I can always use them when I am in a pinch. The best part about sticking to one type family is that the x-heights and the length of ascenders and descenders will match nicely.

Let's say that you want to make your document "pop" with a wider variety than one type family can offer. You'll need to find an appropriate combination of typefaces. There's no science to this, so you'll need to learn to trust your eyes. Here are a few helpful tips:

- Choose typefaces that have similar x-heights and similar lengths of ascenders and descenders. Typefaces with higher x-heights look denser on the page than typefaces with small x-heights. Similarly, typefaces with shorter ascenders and descenders will look squatty next to a typeface with taller ascenders and descenders.
- Choose typefaces that provide enough contrast to each other to provide the reader with visual cues with which to navigate your document. This is not a complete contradiction of the first tip. Your typefaces should be similar enough that they look like they belong in the same document but provide enough contrast that the reader can easily spot headings. If your two typefaces look too similar, their slight differences may look like you chose the wrong font by mistake. Often, writers use a serif/sans serif combination to provide sufficient contrast.
- Choose a typeface for the body text first. Since this is the text with which the reader has the most interaction, this type should be the most legible. Don't choose a body type with diminished legibility because it fits well with your heading type.
- Ensure that the typeface that provides

the greatest contrast to the paper or background is the typeface that you use for key pieces of information. The reader's eye will drift to the part of the page with the greatest contrast, so use that typeface for the most vital information.

These guidelines can be more readily summed up in three words: *concordance*, *contrast*, and *conflict*.

Concordance, Contrast, and Conflict

You can achieve a concordant look by using one type family throughout your document. The concordant look doesn't generally provide a lot of contrast since it relies only on the different weights (e.g., Roman, bold, and italic) to differentiate between the headings and body type. Some type families, however, have wide varieties of weights from thin to semibold, to black or ultrabold. Within these type families, you can present your documents with sufficient contrast without risking glaring conflict in your type.

Contrast is probably the most widely used type combination in technical communication. Contrast is where typefaces from drastically different families

The Gettysburg Address

Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent....

▲ **Concordance.** A concordant look is created by using different weights within the same type family. The typefaces used are Myriad Pro Bold Semiextended and Myriad Pro Regular.

The Gettysburg Address

Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent....

▲ **Contrast.** Contrast is created by using typefaces from different type styles. The typefaces used are Rockwell Regular and Chaparral Pro Regular.

The Gettysburg Address

Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent....

▲ **Conflict.** Conflict occurs when similar typefaces are used, reducing the contrast but not providing concordance. The typefaces used are Didot Regular and Bodoni MT Regular.

are used (e.g., a sans serif heading with a serif body type). When combining typefaces, choose two typefaces that are sufficiently different. The easiest way to do this is to choose two different styles of type.

Conflict between typefaces occurs when two typefaces of the same style are used—this needs to be avoided. For example, you would never use two Old Style typefaces together because they are not sufficiently different to provide contrast, nor are they similar enough for a concordant look. Your readers' eyes will stop dead in their tracks, and they will scratch their heads as they try to figure out if you accidentally selected the wrong font.

Outside of that general advice, I can suggest a few typeface combinations using fonts from such readily available resources as Microsoft Office, Microsoft Windows, Adobe Creative Suite, and Mac OS X. Refer to the figures on page 15 for suggested combinations. Have some fun and learn to trust your eyes when you're designing your documents.

Conclusion

Great typography and document design will not make up for lousy content. Ensure that your document is structured and well written.

After your content is up to snuff, invest some time planning which typefaces will suit the tone of your documents (e.g., your résumé and cover letter are sales pieces first and foremost). Use the same typefaces and similar design elements throughout your documents. Choose typefaces that represent your company's identity and use typography to build your brand. Using typefaces across all communications you have with your readers will show that you have a conscientious eye for detail and a well-developed design acumen. **i**

Michael Opsteegh (octechwriter@yahoo.com) has been an STC member for seven years and served as the newsletter editor for Orange County STC's TechniScribe from 2007 to 2009. He has written policies and procedures in the financial services industry and currently writes software documentation for Eyefinity/OfficeMate in Irvine, California.