A Crash Course in Typography: The Basics of Type

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🕐 March 28th, 2011   👤 Cameron Chapman   🗁 Essentials, Icons & Fonts   💬 36

Typography could be considered the most important part of any design. It's definitely among the most important elements of any design project. And yet it's often the part of a design that's left for last, or barely considered at all. **Designers are often intimidated** by typography, which can result in bland typographical design or a designer always using one or two "reliable" typefaces in their designs. [fblike]

This series aims to change that. If you're intimidated by typography, or even just aren't quite sure where to start, then read on. We'll break down typographic theory and practice, **starting with the basics** (so that everyone starts on the same page).

In this part, we'll talk about the basics of typographic theory, including the different kinds of typefaces (and how typefaces and fonts differ), as well as the basic anatomy of a typeface. And each part will also offer more resources for delving deeper into typography.
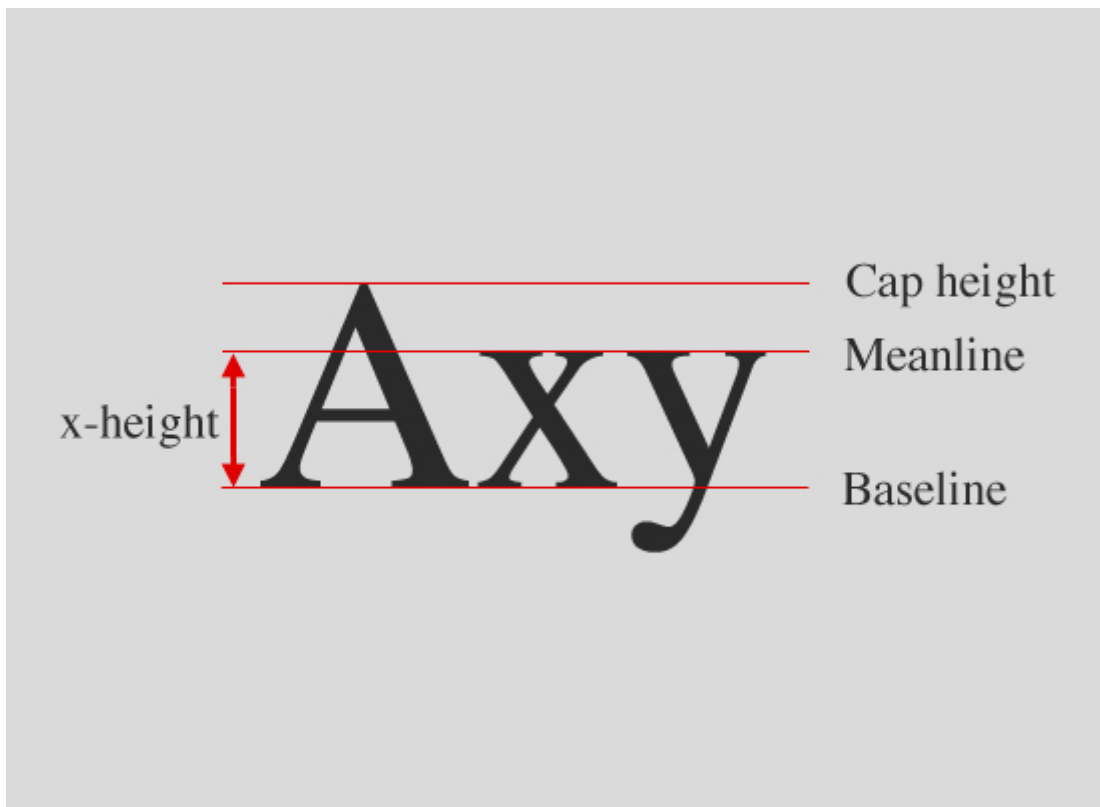
Typefaces vs. Fonts: Difference?

A lot of people use the terms "typeface" and "font" interchangeably. But they're two very distinct things. Before we get started talking about typography, let's get our terms straight.

A **typeface** is a set of typographical symbols and characters. It's the letters, numbers, and other characters that let us put words on paper (or screen). A **font**, on the other hand, is traditionally defined as a complete character set within a typeface, often of a particular size and style. Fonts are also specific computer files that contain all the characters and glyphs within a typeface.

When most of us talk about "fonts", we're really talking about typefaces, or type families (which are groups of typefaces with related designs).

Classifying Type

There are a number of **different ways to classify typefaces** and type families. The most common classifications are by technical style: serif, sans-serif, script, display, and so on. Typefaces are also classified by other technical

specifications, such as proportional vs. monospaced, or by more fluid and interpretational definitions, such as the mood they create.

Serif

Serif   typefaces are called "serifs" in reference to the small lines that are attached to the main strokes of characters within the face. **Serif typefaces** are most often used for body copy in print documents, as well as for both body text and headlines online. The readability of serifs online has been debated, and some designers prefer not to use serifs for large blocks of copy.

Crimson Text *is a* **serif** typeface.

Within the serif classification, there are many sub-types. **Old Style serifs** (also called humanist) are the oldest typefaces in this classification, dating back to the mid 1400s. The main characteristic of old style characters is their diagonal stress (the thinnest parts of the letters appear on the angled strokes, rather than the vertical or horizontal ones). Typefaces in this category include Adobe Jenson, Centaur, and Goudy Old Style.

Adobe Jenson

is an *Old Style*

serif typeface

Transitional serifs date back to the mid 1700s, and are generally the most common serif typefaces. **Times New Roman** and **Baskerville** are both transitional serifs, as are Caslon, Georgia, and Bookman. The differences between thick and thin strokes in transitional typefaces are more pronounced than they are in old style serifs, but less so than in modern serifs.

Baskerville

is a Transitional

serif typeface

Modern serifs, which include typefaces like Didot and Bodoni, have a much more pronounced contrast between thin and thick lines, and have have a vertical stress and minimal brackets. They date back to the late 1700s.

The final main type of serif typeface is the slab serif. **Slab serifs** have little to no contrast between thick and thin lines, and have thick, rectangular serifs, and sometimes have fixed widths. The underlying characters hapes often more closely resemble sans serif fonts.

Sans-Serif

[Sans-serif](#) typefaces are called such because they lack serif details on characters. Sans-serif typefaces are often more modern in appearance than serifs. The first sans-serifs were created in the late 18th century.

There are **four basic classifications of sans-serif** typefaces: Grotesque, Neo-grotesque, Humanist, and Geometric. Grotesques are the earliest, and include fonts like Franklin Gothic and Akzidenze Grotesk. These typefaces often have letterforms that are very similar to serif typefaces, minus the serifs.

Neo-grotesque typefaces include some of the most common typefaces: MS Sans Serif, Arial, Helvetica and Univers are all neo-grotesques. They have a relatively plain appearance when compared to the grotesques.

Humanist typefaces include Gill Sans, Frutiger, Tahoma, Verdana, Optima, and Lucide Grande. These are more calligraphic than other sans-serif typefaces, and are also the most legible (hence the popularity of some of them for website body copy). They're more calligraphic than other sans-serifs, meaning they have a greater variation in line widths.

Geometric sans-serifs are more closely based on geometric shapes. Generally, the "O"s in geometrics will appear circular, and the letter "a" is almost always simple, just a circle with a tail. They're the least commonly-used for body copy, and are also the most modern sans-serifs, as a general rule.

Script

[Scripts](#) are based upon handwriting, and offer very fluid letterforms. There are two basic classifications: **formal** and **casual**. Formal scripts are often reminiscent of the handwritten letterforms common in the 17th and 18th centuries. Some scripts are based directly on the handwriting of masters like George Snell and George Bickham. There are modern creations, too, including Kuenstler Script. They're common for very elegant and elevated typographical designs, and are unsuitable for body copy.

Casual scripts more closely resemble modern handwriting, and date back to the mid-twentieth century. They're much less formal, often with stronger strokes and a more brush-like appearance. Casual scripts include Mistral and Brush Script.

Display

[Display](#) typefaces are probably the broadest category and include the most variation. The main characteristic is that they're unsuitable for body copy and are best reserved for headlines or other short copy that needs attention drawn to it. **Display typefaces** can be formal, or informal, and evoke any kind of mood. They're more commonly seen in print design, but are becoming more popular online with the use of web fonts.

Also included among display typefaces are **blackletter** typefaces, which were the original typefaces used with the first printing presses. Since that time, better, more readable fonts have been developed.

Dingbats and Specialty Typefaces

[Dingbats](#) are specialty typefaces that consist of symbols and ornaments instead of letters. Wingdings is probably the best-known dingbat font, though there are now thousands, often created around themes.
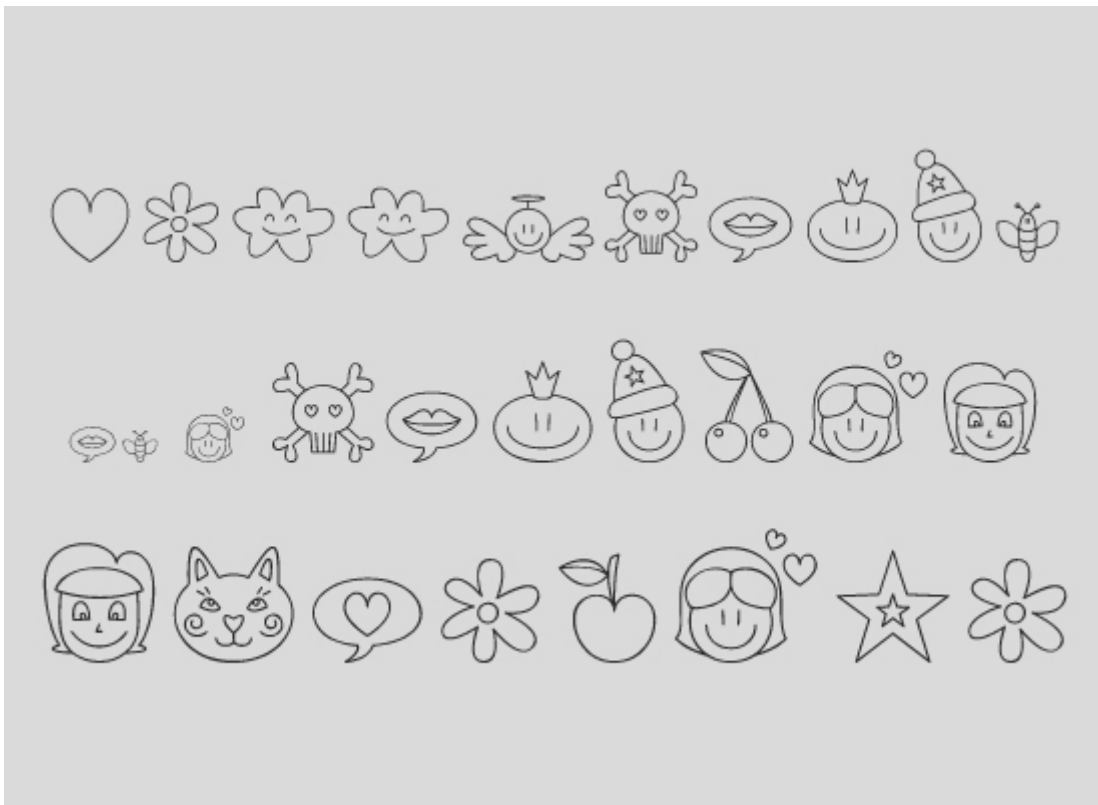
The typeface above is Jellodings.

Proportional vs. Monospaced

In [proportional](#) typefaces, the space a character takes up is dependent on the natural width of that character. An "i" takes up less space than an "m", for example. Times New Roman is a proportional typeface. In **monospace typefaces**, on the other hand, each character takes up the same amount of space. Narrower characters simply get a bit more spacing around them to make up for the difference in width. Courier New is one example of a monospace typeface.

Adobe Caslon is Proportional

Courier New is Monospaced

Mood

The mood of a typeface is an important part of how it should be used. Different typefaces have strikingly different moods. Commonly used moods include formal vs. informal, modern vs classic/traditional, and light vs dramatic. **Some typefaces have very distinct moods**. For example, Times New Roman is pretty much always going to be a traditional font, which is why it's so commonly used for business correspondence. Verdana, on the other hand, has a more modern mood.

Some typefaces are more transcendent, and can convey almost any mood based on the content and the other typefaces they're combined with. Helvetica is often considered one such font.

Times is Formal

Fontin is Informal

Goudy Old Style is Classic

Verdana is Modern

Benton Gothic is Light

ChunkFive is Dramatic

Helvetica is Neutral

Weights & Styles

Within the majority of typefaces, you'll find more than one style and/or weight. Weights are often classified as "light", "thin", "regular", "medium", "bold", "heavy", or "black". Each of these refers to the thickness of the strokes that make up the characters:

Benton Gothic Thin
Benton Gothic Light
Benton Gothic Medium
Benton Gothic Bold

Adobe Caslon Regular
Adobe Caslon SemiBold
Adobe Caslon Bold

There are **three general styles** you'll find with many typefaces: italic, oblique, and small caps. Small caps are often used for headings or subheadings, to add variety to your typography if using a single typeface.

Italic and **oblique** are often confused or used interchangeably, but are two distinct styles. Oblique type is simply a slanted version of the regular characters. You could create this using the "distort" function in Photoshop, although sometimes a separate oblique font is included within a typeface. Italics are slanted like obliques, but are actually a separate set of characters, with their own unique letterforms.

ADOBE CASLON
SMALLCAPS

Adobe Caslon Italic
Adobe Caslon Regular
Adobe Caslon Oblique

The Anatomy of a Typeface

The different letterforms within a typeface share a few common characteristics. These characteristics can be important in determining whether two (or more) typefaces work well together, or clash. Here are the **most basic parts** of a typeface:
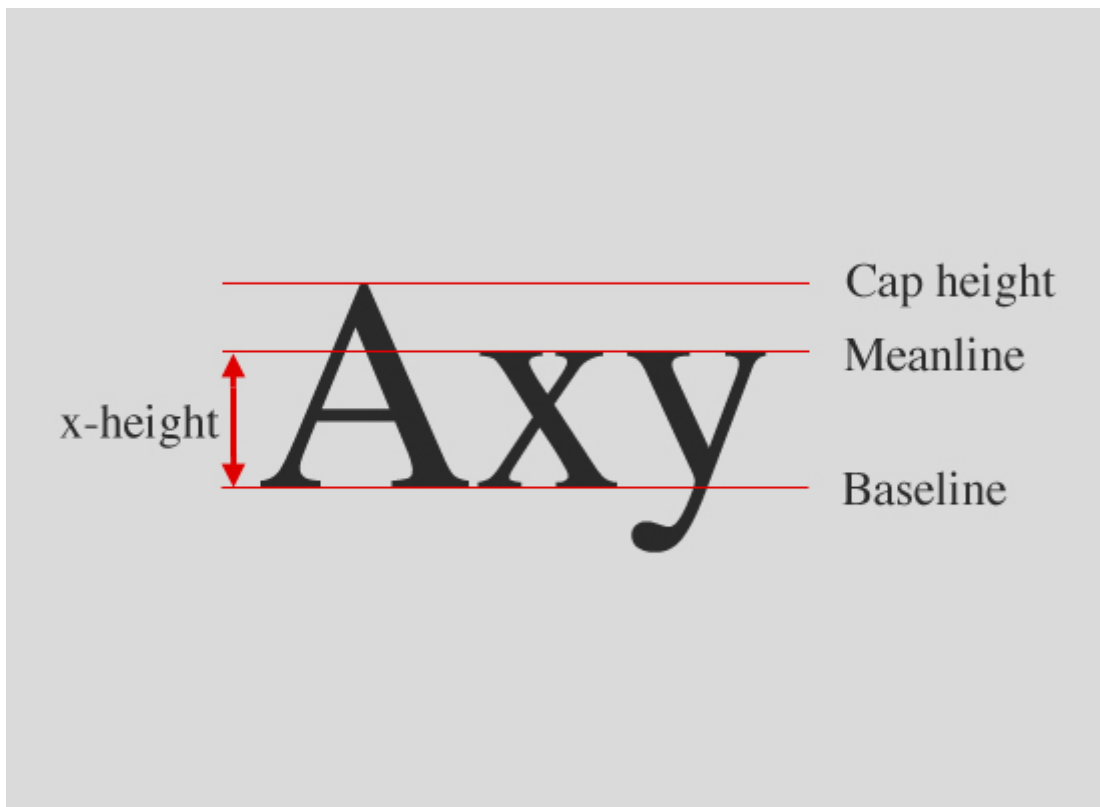
The above image shows the different guidelines that are generally present in a typeface. The **baseline** is the invisible line that all the characters sit on. Rounded letters sometimes sit just a tiny bit under the baseline, and descenders always drop below this line. A given typeface will have a consistent baseline.

The **meanline** is the height of most of the lowercase characters within a typeface, and is generally based on the lowercase "x" if there are varying heights among the lowercase characters. This is also where the term "x-height" comes from. The cap height is the distance between the baseline and the top of uppercase letters like "A".

The above illustration shows three common parts to letterforms. The **stem** is the main upright of any letter, including the primary diagonal. It's could be considered the anchor of the character. The **bar** is any horizontal part, which are sometimes also called arms. The **bowl** is the curved part of a character that creates an interior empty space. The inside of a bowl is a counter.
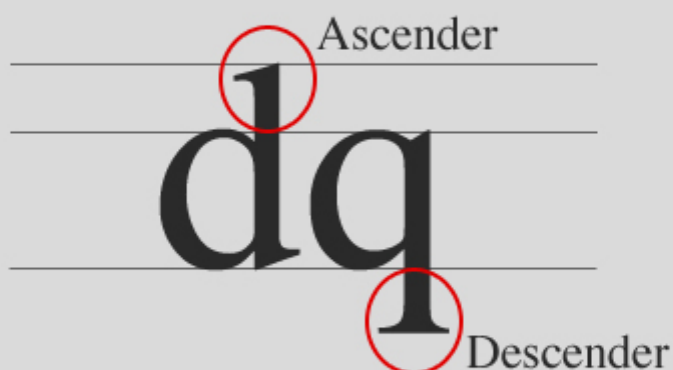
The **ascender** of a lowercase character is any part that rises above the meanline, such as the uprights on the letters "d", "h", and "b". **Descenders** are the parts of a lowercase character that drop below the baseline, such as in a "p", "q" or "g".

Serifs are the extra flourish at the end of a stroke on serif typefaces. Some typefaces have very **pronounced serifs**, while others are barely distinguishable.

The **aperture** of a character refers to the opening at the bottom of some characters, such as the uppercase "A" or lowercase "m". An **ear** is a decorative extension on a letter, as highlighted on the "g" above. **Hairlines** are the thinnest part of a serif typeface.

Crossbars are horizontal strokes, as found on the uppercase "A" and "H". **Terminals** are only found on serif characters, and are the end of any line that doesn't have a serif. **Loops** are found on some lowercase "g" characters, and can be fully closed or partially closed.
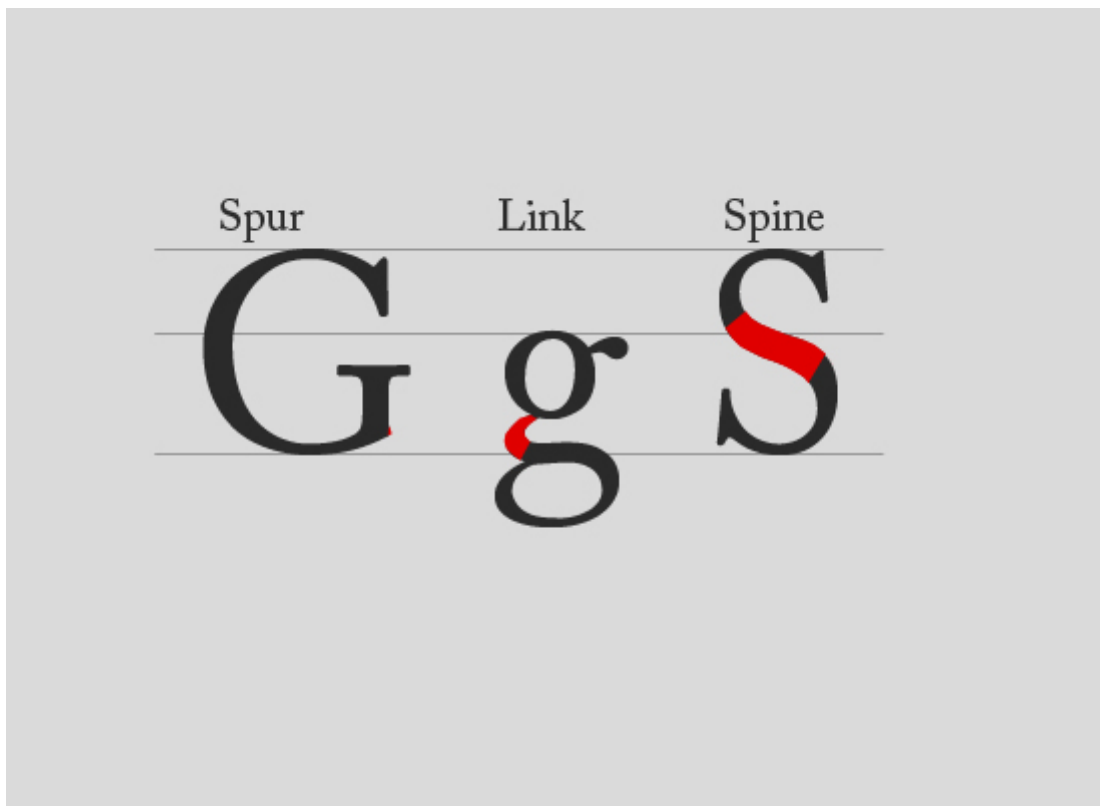
Spurs are tiny projections from curved strokes, such as on some uppercase "G" characters. **Links** connect the top and bottom bowls of a double-stacked lowercase "g". The **spine** is the curved stroke found on the letter "s".
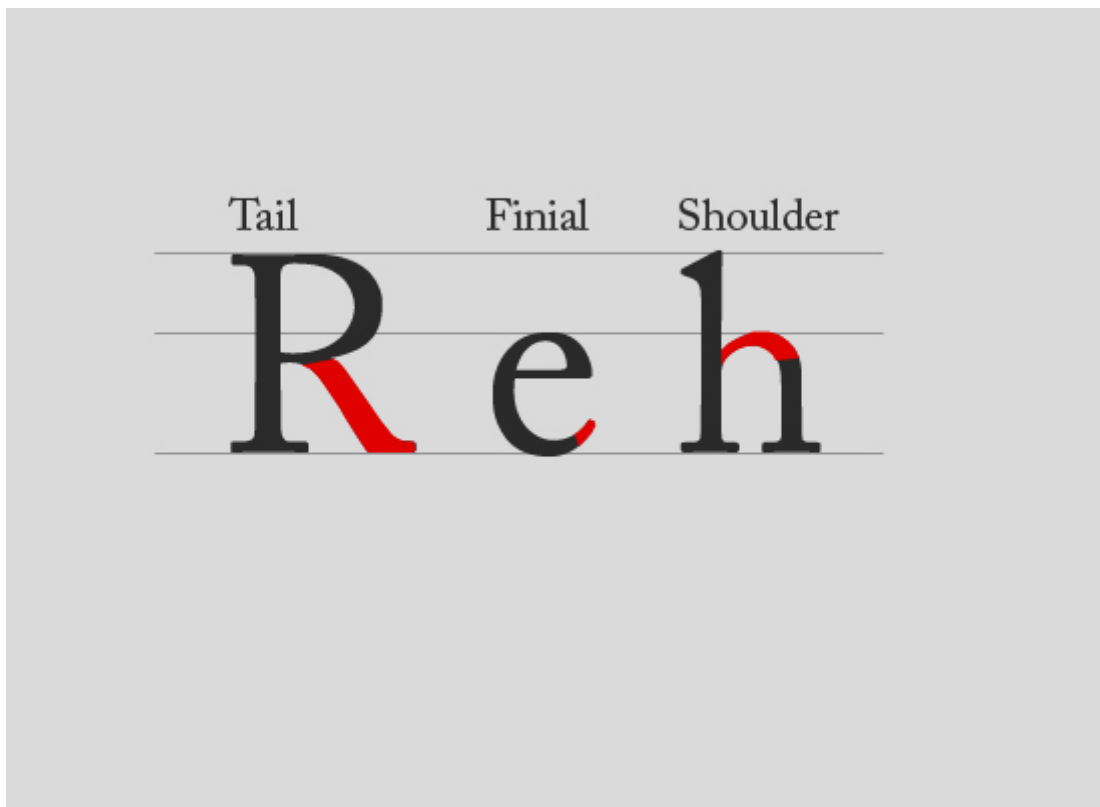
Tails are sometimes-decorative descending strokes, as seen on an uppercase "R". **Finials** are the tapered endings of some strokes. **Shoulders** are any curved stroke that originate from a stem.

In Part 2...

Next Monday we'll discuss paragraph composition and using special typographic characters, like ligatures and hyphens. We'll dive right into basic typographic layouts, and how to decide on a typeface for your project. Stay tuned!

Additional Resources

→ Anatomy of a Typeface – An excellent graphical reference for the parts of a typeface's characters.

→ Type is Sexy – This site has a great section on the anatomy of a typeface.

→ Which Font? Voice of Typography – This article discusses the voice (mood) of typefaces, and how they impact a design.

→ Type Classificiations – A visual representation of the different typeface classifications, from the Adobe Type Library.

→ ABC Typography – A Virtual Type Museum – This site offers a museum-style history of typefaces, including classification information.

(ik)

[fblike]

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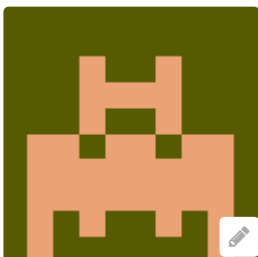Join our monthly newsletter by signing up below an get more interesting content like this one.

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Cameron Chapman

Cameron Chapman is a professional Web and graphic designer with many years of experience. She writes for a number of blogs, including her own, Cameron Chapman On Writing. She's also the author of Internet Famous: A Practical Guide to Becoming an Online Celebrity.

TYPOGRAPHY

Peter Main

Nice! Thanks!

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Thomas Morris

Nice and simple, but with a fair bit of information. Much appreciated! The importance of typography is often forgotten.

👍 0 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Brian Jones

Excellent post – thank you! This comes at the perfect timing as I am just 2 weeks in on learning typography. Looking forward to next weeks post!

👍 0 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Tamara

Excellent crash course. I will definitely be back for more as I am quite keen on learning the basics of web and graphic design:) Thanks.

👍 0 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

musavir

Simple and informative, Thank you!

👍 0 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Stacey

Very nice info and well written

👍 0 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

GeekCyclopedia

Really useful tutorials, especially for beginner designers like me. Learned a lot about typography. Thanks.

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Kim

Very useful and a great summary, thank you for that!

👍 2 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Isik

Very simple and tidy explanation.

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Raja Sandhu

Nothing like a little refresher to remind me what an aperture was. More so, a great intro for the beginner. A very handy and concise post. Thank you!

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Kristjan Farrugia

Great post :)

Looking forward for the paragraph composition!

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Pablinho

Very useful.

Can't wait for the second part.

thanks

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

gravity

Guest

What is the mood of Trebuchet MS

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Eilonvi

Guest

Excellent article! I learnt a lot from it, and is also very interesting. Thanks :)

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

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ivebo

Guest

Nice! Thanks!

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

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pastori zumbach

Guest

Really enjoyed reading the post which is both informative and visual. Thanks.

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Thomas Molby

Guest

Fantastic article. Thank you so much!

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

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eugenek

Guest

I'm new to typography but learned a lot. Thanks for great article. I have slight problem with "The Anatomy of a Typeface" because i guess it getting too much into details but some will definitely need this knowledge…

Waiting for Part II

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Saeed Neamati

Guest

Such an educational article. I loved it. Specially type anatomy.
Thanks man.

👍 1 👎

Will

Nice little refresher there. Thanks!

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Joffrey Kater

Great post, thanks!
Another useful typographic resource combined with CSS usage:
http://webtypography.net/toc/

Definitely waiting to see part 2 :)

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Brent

Thanks, a clear and useful presentation.

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Giovanni

Great article for typography newbies! Thanks for sharing :)

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Ivanov

Thank you so much for sharing this article with us!! I am eagerly waiting part II!

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

Toddo

I wish I had this article back when I was still in school! Great stuff :D

👍 1 👎

🕐 6 years 6 months ago

bryant

wow, it's like a school of font

Salman Khan

Such a wonderful article, so informative yet interesting. Thank you for the effort and Im a fan.

oliver

really helpful, thanks

Ujval Gola

We really enjoy what you write about here. We try and visit your site every day so keep up the good posts!

banky

Great article, it sure helped, me as as I am doing a destop publishing course. Thanks and keep it up!

Mark

Thank you. My wife was a graphic designer when I met her. Later a creative director in the world of print advertising. When we first started dating she said that for me to fully understand what she does and what she values I would have to learn about type. I spend our first few dates learning and setting type. We looked at type books and she taught me how to use a Schaedlere ruler. I came to love the dedication and belief she had in the art of type and what it could do on a printed page. Type spoke… Read more »

Saz

Thank you for this. Just starting out on my journey into design and this was very simple and easy to follow and to understand. Thank you for writing it :)

👍 **1** 👎   🕐 5 years 6 months ago

Carmen
Guest

very useful information!!! Thanks

👍 **1** 👎   🕐 5 years 19 days ago

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sha
Guest

Thanks for taking the time to type this up and publish it. This is a PERFECT crash course for typeface. Gives you everything you need to know if you just want the basics, and is a great jumping point for anyone who wants to know more. Well done.

👍 **2** 👎   🕐 4 years 10 months ago

Michael
Guest

very interested in the debate around the readability of serif type online.
Where does this come from? It goes against everything I ever learned after years in the graphic arts and publishing business.

👍 **2** 👎   🕐 4 years 7 months ago

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aung
Guest

Thank you very much.

👍 **1** 👎   🕐 3 years 8 months ago

ⓘ

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