Considering that artists have been designing them for over 500 years and are still doing so today, the fact that there are over 30,000 typefaces isn't surprising. After working with type for a while you may begin to notice some familiar typefaces in magazines, on billboards and even on television. But, even the most seasoned designer will recognize only a few dozen by sight.

To some extent, the popularity of one typefaces over others runs in cycles. If an ad with its headline in a particular typeface wins lots of awards, you can bet you'll be seeing lots of ads in that font the following year. In the 1990s for instance, fonts with very tall ascenders got lots of exposure.
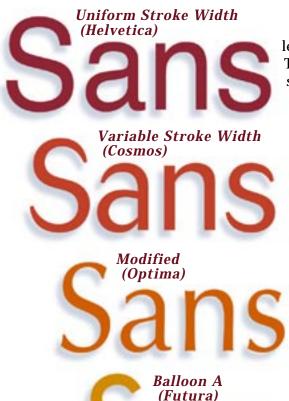
For reference purposes, I'll be telling you the names of the fonts I use as examples. But, I do not expect you to be able to identify fonts by name on quizzes. I DO, however, expect you to know the characteristics that identify a particular category or subcategory. I won't cover all the subcategories or all the minute details that are used-- just some of the most important ones.

The word, **typeface**, is used broadly to refer to an alphabet with letters having a character-defining shapes. In graphic design, type is classified more specifically according to **category**, subcategory, family and font. The term, font, refers to an individual alphabet and often is used interchangeably with the word, typeface. There are three categories into which all type may be classified. They are **serifs**, **sans serifs** and **display** faces.

(Americana)   *(Veljovic)*   *(Grail)*   *(Souvenir)*

Serif typefaces are based on the Roman alphabet. Many were designed 300 to 500 years ago and are still popular today. You can see above that the individual shapes of serif alphabets can vary widely. That's true of each category. But, what all serif fonts have in common are the small extensions at the ends of the strokes of the letters. These are called serifs.

Go to Serif Subcategories

**Uniform Stroke Width
(Helvetica)**

Sans

**Variable Stroke Width
(Cosmos)**

Sans

**Modified
(Optima)**

Sans

**Balloon A
(Futura)**

Sans

Sans serif typefaces simply have no serifs on the letters. The word, sans, is the French word for "without." There was a long debate in the advertising world as to whether sans serif fonts are as easily readable as those with serifs. An extensive study in the early 1990s concluded that consumers have absolutely no preference one way or the other.

Fewer subcategory are defined for sans serif fonts than for serifs. Perhaps that's because the fonts in this category are considerably younger than many serifs--only about 50 years old. Even so, a few distinctions are noteworthy.

Most sans serif fonts have all the strokes of the letter very nearly the same width (top and bottom fonts at left), but a few have width variations (second font from top). Perhaps the most unique look among sans serifs is illustrated by the Optima family (second from bottom). The vertical strokes of the letters are concave at the center and flair at the ends. This creates the optical illusion that the typeface has small serifs.

While many individual letters are used to define subcategories, one of the most obvious is the lower case *a*. The majority of fonts in all categories have the hooded *a* shown in the first three samples at left. Among the sans serifs, however, you'll find a number of fonts with the "balloon on a stick" *a* shown in the last example.

Display fonts run the gamut. Some have serifs, some don't. Some don't even remotely resemble either of the other categories. What distinguishes display fonts is readability. Any font that is difficult or uncomfortable to read in a small size or large quantity is classified as a display typeface. Imagine opening up a 700 page novel or your Sunday newspaper and discovering that the text has been set in one of the display fonts below.

(Shelley Volante)   *(Freeform 710)*   *(Greymantle)*   *(Curlz)*   *(Banshee)*
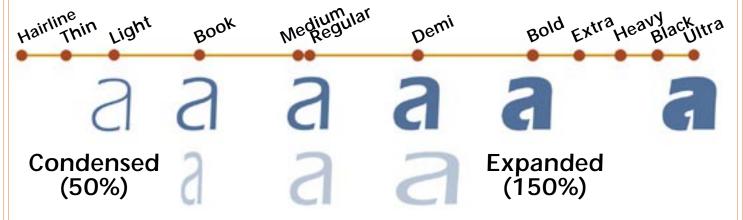
Go to Display Subcategories

Goudy (original)
Goudy Italic

The name of a typeface, Goudy, Bodoni, Helvetica, etc., identifies its family. The members of a type family are variations of the original face. The word after the family name tells either the category to which it belongs (e.g.: Bernhard Modern) or how it was modified. For instance, Goudy **Italic** tells you that the font tilts to the right. The word, **oblique**, is also used sometimes to designate a right tilting font. Because they were originally designed as entirely separate fonts, the italic versions of older fonts generally aren't merely skewed versions of the original, but rather have their own letterforms and character. Today, computers do a passable job of creating italic versions for fonts whose designers didn't.

Another tilted family member is the **back-slant**. It tilts to the left. Although they're very rare as separately designed family members, the skew (or shear) feature in most graphics and layout software lets digital designers create them quite easily. But, don't get too excited. They're somewhat hard to read.

Most type family include one or more variations created by changing the **stroke weight**. Below are examples of the different stroke weight members in the type family called Eras. It also has italic versions for each different weight. I don't know of any font family that has all the weights listed on the chart, but bold versions are very common. Although a bold version can be created in the some computer programs such as PageMaker, but they don't do it very well. It's best to use fonts with names identifying them as bold.

Hairline Thin Light Book Medium Regular Demi Bold Extra Heavy Black Ultra

Condensed
(50%)

Expanded
(150%)

The **expanded** and **condensed** members of a type family are created by stretching or squeezing the width of the letters. Above you can see the difference between stroke and width modifications. A pre-computer designer might have had one or the other of these versions to work with in a family, seldom both. A contemporary

Above are three types of shadow type. At top right is a designed font called Imprint Shadow. The top left font is a computer generated shadow version of the Usherwood Bold. Both bottom versions were made by placing a 20% tinted copy of the Usherwood Bold letters behind them.

There is little difference between designed and computer generated outline fonts (above left). Inline letters such as those above right can be designed in Illustrator as can the swash and flair letters below.

Flair

Swash

designer working in the PageMaker application can make 950 condensed and 1,500 expanded versions simply by manipulating the width of the letters in increments as small as .1%.

As specially designed family members, **shadow** fonts and the others mentioned on this page are quite rare. On the other hand, some can be computer generated or created relatively easily. Notice that the appearance of the different kinds of shadow type can be vary considerably.

Outline fonts have a stroke, but no fill. While families with members are fairly rare, they're a snap to create on a computer.

Inline fonts show a smaller copy of the letter inside a larger one. A rarity among existing fonts, you'll learn how to create them in Adobe Illustrator.

Swash and **flair** versions are always designed. Both members have extensions or curlicues added to the strokes of some letters. Swashes extend downward below the base line and flairs extend upward above it. Occasionally, you'll encounter a more common family member that has a few alternate swash/flair letters. You can locate them using a font browser or the Key Caps function on the Apple menu of your computer.

As if all the variation within type categories, subcategories and families didn't give designers with enough creative possibilities to last a lifetime, could there be still more? You bet. We haven't even scratched the surface. There's a whole spectrum of special effects that can be applied to type after it has been set. As you learn more about typography in class and in your on-line lectures, I hope you begin to see the creative possibilities of type as a powerful visual element in addition to the verbal message.

Special Effects

Return to Typography Intro Page

M/W Schedule

T/T Schedule

Home