



# **PRINCIPLES OF LEGIBILITY**

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# PRINCIPLES OF LEGIBILITY

## Typeface

Typefaces can be divided into serif and sans serif. Serifs are the small strokes at the end of the main strokes of characters, which give horizontal emphasis to a line of type. Serif typefaces are therefore best for large amounts of continuous text. Sans serif typefaces have characters which tend to look similar to each other and are best reserved for headings, captions and short pieces of text.

*Example:* Problems with sans serif typefaces

- III Does this mean III (Roman numerals)
- Or 111 (Arabic numerals)
- Or III (sick)

## Capitals and Lowercase

Lowercase letters have ascenders and descenders, i.e. bdfhld gjq. Words in small letters have a more distinctive shape than those in capitals. We read by recognising word shapes, rather than letter by letter, so that text mainly in small letters will be more legible.

## Type Size, Line Length and Leading

The rule of thumb are these:

Space between letters should be less than word space.

Word space less than space between lines.

Text for continuous reading, the lines should be between 50 and 70 characters in length (10-12 words). If there are fewer than that, there may be too many awkward line breaks; if there are more, it can get difficult for the reader to find the beginning of the next line.

Research shows that type size between 9 and 11 point are more comfortable for sustained reading. Add 20% of the type size for leading.

## Paragraphs

There are two common ways of indicating the start of a new paragraph.

Indent the first line

Inserting extra space above the first line

If you insert extra space, it should be equal to a blank or white line. If you indent the first line, it should be equal to the type size. There is no need to indent the first line of a section - the fact that it follows a heading makes its status clear. Indenting paragraphs is the best option because it saves space.

This example shows an indent for paragraphs. If you indent the first line, it should be equal to the type size, in this example it is 10pts. There is no need to indent the first line of a section - the fact that it follows a heading makes its status clear. Indenting paragraphs is the best option because it saves space.

This is an example of a paragraph which has extra space inserted above the first line.

### Aspects of Typographic Style

Certain basic features of typing have never been current in professional typesetting and should be avoided in documents:

Do not use double space after full stops.

Straight inch (") and feet marks (') should not be used for true 'curly' quotation marks.

Use the hyphen, en and em rule where appropriate:

Hyphens for word division and compound words like 'frost-bitten'.

En or em rule for parenthetical remarks.  
An en rule normally has a space either side.

Do not underline type, use italic or bold for emphasis.

### Mixing Typeface

Mixing of faces has traditionally been kept to a minimum because it slowed down the typographer who had to set the type. Nowadays, theoretically, if you have fifty typefaces and you insist on using all of them, it is possible to do so, even though you are likely to annoy your reader if you use more than two. Of these one would be for display and the other for text. Type mixing in text should be limited to the same face with bold, italic, roman or small caps. There are some conventions which should be allowed in their use:

#### Italics

Usually used with titles of books, plays, films periodicals, newspapers, foreign language words and phrases and textual emphasis, particularly in speech.

*This is an example of  
10pt Palatino Italic*

#### Bold

Bold type can be effective when used in small quantities as it serves to give emphasis.

**This is an example of  
10pt Palatino Bold**

#### Small Capitals

Can be used for post codes, abbreviations and also for emphasis. They are much less distracting and much less ungainly in their use than all caps.

Small capitals can be used for  
qualifications after people's name:

David Beckham BSC

For display purposes, your aim should be harmony and no clashes between your choices of face. To this end it is better to choose contrasting faces like a serified face with a sans serif face. Sans serif faces mixed, are unlikely to work because of the similarities between them. With serif faces however, a modern face like Bodoni could be used for display with an old face like Garamond or Sabon, again because of the contrast in style or square serifs like Rockwell should work well with Times or Baskerville. Your motto in type mixing should always be restraint, don't overdo it.

## Headings

Headings can be manipulated to create emphasis or emotional impact on certain words in the headline. Typographic possibilities of headlines are unlimited. Letterspacing or kerning should always appear equal.

## Reverse Text

Black type on a white background is much easier to read. However reverse type should be considered for creating an effect with headlines or small amounts of text. It is often better to use bold when reversing out type, as this prevents loss of definition. It is not advisable to use fine serif fonts.

Below is an example of mixing typefaces. As an exercise, use the same text and heading with different combinations, as suggested and compare the results, remember always use restrain.

**Goldilocks and the Three Bears**  
Once upon a time there were three bears, who lived in a cosy little cottage at the edge of a wood. They were Mama Bear and Papa Bear and of course, Baby Bear.

18/24pt Helvetica with 14/18pt Bookman.

## POINTS TO CONSIDER

Serif type for large amounts of text.

Keep lines set in capitals to a minimum.

10-12 words per line.

Indent paragraphs to save space.

Do not underline type, use instead bold and italic.

ALL CAPITALS

Capital of first word only

Capitals To All Words

Capitals to all Important Words

**This is an Example  
of a Reverse**

*Examples of Setting Headings*

## QUESTIONS ON LEGIBILITY

- (1) Which is more easier to read, words set in capitals or words set in lowercase ?
- (2) Name a method of indicating paragraphs ?
- (3) Type should not be underlined, give an alternative method of creating emphasis to a heading ?
- (4) On a page of type how many typefaces should be used ?
- (5) Where would you use an italic typeface ?
- (6) Give an example of the style which could be used for typesetting headings ?
- (7) When producing reverse text, what style of typeface should be avoided ?