

Letters are made for reading

A lot of things has to be taken into consideration when you make typographical choices. With the typography of logos and headlines, etc, the style and tone of your publication is determined. But when it comes to the body text, legibility is more important than anything else.

BACK IN THE LATE SEVENTIES when I was studying architecture at the Royal Academy of Arts, one of the rules we were taught was: “A building must have a distinctive entrance”. That ought to make sense: It hardly matters what’s inside a house if you can’t find the door, does it?

Good typography, I’d say, is like the entrance to a house. It should lead you inside, help you to the contents—which is indeed the most important thing.

But then again, what is good typography? Well, as there are numerous disciplines of graphic design, this question does not have one single—or simple—answer. What may be right for an outdoor billboard would hardly work on the side of a pillbox. But if we concentrate on publication design, typography can be roughly classified into two groups. The Canadian newspaper designer Lucie Lacava talks about “macro” and “micro” typography.

The “macro” level is what you see at first glance. Logos, headlines, pullout quotes, etc. On the macro level, style is important. A Franklin Gothic headline looks different from one set with Adobe Garamond. The reader is likely to get the impression of one kind of story if you use the Franklin headline, quite another if you have picked Garamond. Your choice of headline face (of macro typography in general) strikes a tone and determines a great deal of your publication’s overall appearance.

In “micro” typography, on the other hand, legibility is more important than style. Or maybe we ought to talk about “readability”, a phrase used by some typographers, making the point that what you find legible depends more than anything else on what you are used to read. However perfect the letterforms of a new typeface, it may still appear hard to read if people think it looks strange. Perhaps this is why most people still prefer text with serifs even though repeated surveys have shown no legibility differences between sans and serif typefaces.

If you read the same newspaper every day, chances are you will find its copy relatively easy to read—simply because you are familiar with it. As fashion changes, “typefaces which we perceive as illegible today may well become tomorrow’s classic choice”, as the American type designer Zuzana Licko has predicted.

Nevertheless, most experts agree that there are other aspects—of a more physical nature—which should be taken into consideration when choosing and fine-tuning the typography for a publication.

For one, size matters. Big letters are more easily read than small letters (surprise!). Size can, however, be a pretty diffuse quantity when talking typography—due to the fact that the measure we normally use, the point size, derives from an era when type was set in hot metal.

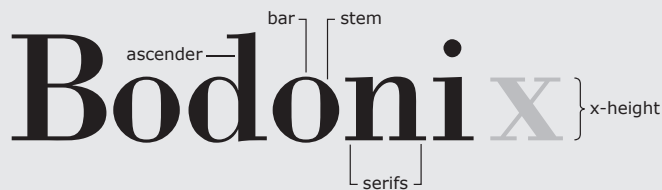
The point size marked the total height of the lead type, including ascenders and descenders

JOKKMOKK
CITY OF FEAR

Crime rate rises in Jokkmokk

A Franklin Gothic headline—and one typeset with Adobe Garamond. Your choice of headline face (of macro typography in general) strikes a tone and determines a great deal of your publication’s overall appearance.

Ionic No 5



Most high legibility typefaces have 3 qualities in common: A big x-height, large open counters, and little contrast between stems and bars. Ionic No5 has these features, Bodoni does not. Both are the same point size but see how much bigger Ionic looks because of its x-height.

(as in the letters d and p). But not all typefaces share the same proportions. On the contrary, letterforms vary greatly from font to font. Ascenders and descenders can be towering in some typefaces and all but non-existent in others. Consequently, as point size describes only the total height of the type, regardless of proportions, a 9-point letter can look big and clearly legible in one font and tiny in another.

In search of a more useful description of the size of letters, typographers introduced the x-height. Cryptical as it may sound, there is nothing mysterious about this phenomenon; it is simply the height of the lower-case x. The letter x was chosen because you can draw lines along the top and bottom of the x to define what you might call the "bulk" of the letters, the most important parts when estimating if type looks big or small. A typeface with a large x-height will look bigger than one with a small x-height, even though their point sizes may be identical.

Another important legibility parameter is whether lettershapes are open or closed. This

goes for the counters (i.e. the white space inside some letters, such as lower-case a and e) as well as for how lines are drawn in general. Some letters, such as "s", can tend to close—as it does in, among others, the widely used Helvetica—or open up, as in the equally popular Frutiger.

The problem with closed letterforms is that different letters end up looking more or less alike. In Helvetica, for instance, the letters o, s, and e can be quite difficult to tell from one another—while they are easily distinguished in Frutiger.

FOR YEARS, TYPE DESIGNERS have been experimenting in order to produce more legible typefaces. Back in the 1920s, a group of American newspaper publishers agreed that they needed better fonts than those available for newspaper printing at the time. They urged two type suppliers (Linotype and Intertype) to initiate work on the design of new typefaces, suited for printing under difficult conditions.

In 1926, Ionic No 5 was launched as the first out of five typefaces designed specifically for newspaper use—what was to become known as the Linotype Legibility Group. Ionic No 5 has a very large x-height, big slab-shaped serifs and little contrast between stems and bars (thick and thin lines). These features made the face easy to read and enabled it to withstand much of the distortion caused by rotary printing on bad paper. Also, it made the letters look a lot bigger than those of most contemporary typefaces.

The Legibility series became an instant success. Within 18 months of the premiere of Ionic No 5, the typeface had been bought by 3,000 newspapers all over USA.

The x-height is often regarded as the most important legibility factor. In 1930, the average x-height of all standard typefaces was 65% of the



The lettershapes of Helvetica (top) tend to close while those of Frutiger (bottom) open up, leading to improved legibility.

Nimrod Swift Utopia LinoLetter Charter Gulliver

During the 1980s and 90s, the number of new fonts has been mushrooming, boosted by the PC revolution. Many of these typefaces represent type designers' continuous attempts to optimize legibility through bigger x-heights, open counters, simplified lettershapes, etc. From top left: Nimrod (Robin Nicholas, 1980), Swift (Gerard Unger, 1985), Utopia (Robert Slimbach, 1989), LinoLetter (Reinhard Haus, 1993), Charter (Matthew Carter, 1987), and Gulliver (Gerard Unger, 1994).

H-height; in 1980, this percentage had grown to 72%. Some modern faces speed the x-height up as high as 85% (for instance, Roger Excoffon's Antique Olive from 1968). A 1989 study carried out by the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St Petersburg, Florida, USA, tested the legibility of 16 popular bodytype faces. The winners were all faces with very large x-heights: Nimrod, Charter, and good old Ionic No 5.

As print quality has improved vastly since the days of hot metal, however, a typeface can now be perfectly legible on newsprint without having to look as "crude" as Ionic No 5. During the 1980s and 90s, we have seen new typefaces emerge, combining the reader-friendliness of the Legibility series with more elegant lettershapes, often hinting back in the history of writing, back to the days

when calligraphy was the main source of inspiration for type design.

Nevertheless, a large x-height still seems to be a common denominator.

In typographical circles, this tendency meets criticism because the proportions of type are thus being standardized to an extent when aesthetics suffer. Typefaces of certain historical periods, the critics point out, are characterized more than anything else by small x-heights and long ascenders and descenders. Take away these qualities and you end up with a featureless typeface. Why not, these critics suggest, exploit the assets of today's print technology to the full and use original old-style typefaces instead of less elegant imitations?

If treated the right way, genuine oldstyle faces such as Garamond and Janson can be easily read (the same goes for sans serifs). It is mainly a question of balancing the point size with the leading (the distance between lines). Typefaces with small x-heights need bigger point sizes but can, on the other hand, be set without extra leading because the long ascenders and descenders provide sufficient white space between the "bulk" of lines. The fine-tuning of a body type face includes kerning and spacing (adjusting the spacing of letters and the space inbetween words) as well as fitting the leading to the column width.

Bottom line: A good typographer can make just about any typeface legible. Unfortunately, not all people working with type are good typographers. When in doubt, play it safe: Use a handsome typeface with a reasonably big x-height, large open counters, and little contrast between stems and bars. But don't forget to use your eyes. With a little practice, it is actually quite easy to SEE whether type is legible or not.

OLE MUNK

Times New Roman Poynter Oldstyle Benton Modern

The ambition of combining maximum legibility with classical elegance has led to quite a few popular typefaces. Stanley Morison's Times, designed for the famous London newspaper in 1932, builds on Plantin which in its turn was modeled upon the Grosse Mediane Romaine, created by Robert Granjon in the 16th century. Times became the most successful typeface of the 20th century. Poynter Oldstyle and Benton Modern are the results of a new cooperation between The Poynter Institute for Media Studies in Florida and The Font Bureau in Boston, called the Readability Series. Poynter Oldstyle is inspired by the Dutch renaissance type designer Hendrik van den Keere while Benton Modern starts from the work of Morris Fuller Benton, creator of several popular newspaper typefaces from the beginning of the 20th century.