

Type Basics

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Some basic concepts for improving your use of type.

Editors and graphic artists have to be jacks-of-all-trades: In addition to working with video and other imagery, we are also expected to know how to handle sound and text as well. But of course, not everyone is born knowing how to handle all these different media types. That's why we focused on audio in our last two articles for Artbeats.com, and why we want to share some basic typography tips, hints, and resources with you here. We'll start with some basic rules of good typography, and then move onto the more subjective world of font choice.

Not a Typewriter

Mechanical typewriters had limited character sets, restricted by their design. As a result, typists had to make compromises, using the same key for multiple tasks – such as using the same character for an open quote, close quote, and inch mark. However, those three applications actually demand three different glyphs: “, ”, and ” respectively. By contrast, computers give you access to all three. Unfortunately, many users stick to the restrictions imposed by old-fashioned typewriters, still using ” for these varied purposes. The result looks less than sophisticated.

Fortunately, more software (such as Adobe After Effects from version 6 onward) offer “smart quotes” as either an option or their default behavior. If your software of choice doesn't, here are the key combinations required to access these alternate glyphs on your computer:

| Character | Macintosh | Windows |
|------------------------|----------------|----------|
| opening single quote ` | Option+[| Alt-0145 |
| closing single quote ’ | Option+Shift+[| Alt-0146 |
| opening double quote “ | Option+[| Alt-0147 |
| closing double quote ” | Option+Shift+[| Alt-0148 |

(To access these alternate glyphs under Windows, you need to hold down the Alt key while typing the numbers on the numeric keypad with the Num Lock key on.)

It's usually acceptable to use the regular tick marks (the ` and ” characters) to indicate feet and inches or minutes and seconds – provided that the font you're

using produces nice-looking results. If you're unhappy with the look of the straight feet and inch marks in the font you're using, consider employing the angled versions available in the Symbol font for just these characters:

| Character | Mac (Symbol.dfont) | Windows |
|-----------------------|--------------------|----------|
| feet (or minutes) ’ | Option-4 | Alt-0162 |
| inches (or seconds) ” | Option-Comma | Alt-0178 |

Another common typesetting mistake is to use hyphens for everything, including two hyphens (such as --) to signify a dash. We're sorry, but this is a real sign of an amateur typesetting job. Instead, use an “em” dash or an “en” dash. An en dash gets its name because it is the same width as the letter “n” in a font; the em dash is the width of the letter “m”. The most common type style in North America is to use an em dash with no spaces (like this—for example), while in Europe it is more common to use an en dash

surrounded by spaces (like this – for example). We personally prefer the en dash approach, as it's a little less disruptive to read, and allows lines to “break” more smoothly in paragraphs of text. The en dash (with no spaces) is also the correct one to use when signifying ranges of numbers, such as 1935–77.

Some programs such as Microsoft Word have options to automatically replace -- with a nicer dash while you type; here are the characters

you can enter manually in other applications:

| Character | | Mac (Symbol.dfont) | Windows |
|-----------|---|--------------------|----------|
| en dash | – | Opt+hyphen | Alt-0150 |
| em dash | — | Opt+Shift+hyphen | Alt-0151 |

If you are interested in the multiple variations dashes and their correct usages – including the symbols to use when coding a web site – there is a great article on the subject on Wikipedia: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dash.

Personal Space

Another important concept in typesetting is the space between characters. There are two terms involved here: tracking, which is the average space between all characters in a word or line, and kerning, which is the space between a specific pair of characters.

You can reduce tracking to fit more characters on a line (sometimes necessary for long titles or names in lower thirds), or increase it to create a more stylized look. If the type will be displayed very small on screen, you may also need to increase the tracking to ensure the characters don't bleed together when compressed for broadcast or a web video.

Kerning is more of a corrective measure, curing gaps that are too large between characters, or spacing out characters that are too close to each other. Most professional fonts have good "kerning tables" that automatically determine the spacing between character pairs, but many still benefit from some manual tweaking. Problems become more obvious with freeware fonts, or when mixing together different font families, styles or sizes in the same line or word.

There is no hard and fast rule about kerning, as different character shapes require different space to "look" correct. It's not just about measuring the nearest point of contact between characters; instead, you are roughly aiming to have the same volume of empty space between characters, taking their curves and bends into account. Indeed, one of the automatic kerning modes in Adobe applications is called "optical" where it tries to analyze this space. As a lower-tech solution, some suggest squinting when you look at type, so that you don't see the individual characters any more – just blobs and the spaces between.

In the first example here, the 't' and 'y' are too close together, while the 'y' and 'p' are too far apart. In the second example – where we used a capital 'T' in place of the lower-case 't' – now the 'T' and 'y' are too far apart as well.

Figure 1 (below): In the first example, the default spacing between 't' and 'y' in the word on the left is too close, while the spacing between 'y' and 'p' is too large. We used kerning controls to adjust this spacing in the word on the right so that the volume of empty area between individual character pairs is more even. In the second example, the capital 'T' presented a different kerning challenge than the lower-case 't', needing to be moved closer to the 'y' rather than further away.

type type
Type Type

In our second example where the 'T' is capitalized, its upper bar floats well above the 'y' instead of threatening to collide with it. In this case, the 'y' can be moved much closer to the 'T' to fill in the empty space underneath its bar. Again, you will have even more issues when mixing and matching fonts, styles, and sizes in the same word or line.

Adobe applications share the same user interface for kerning: Go into editing mode (choose the Text tool rather than the normal Selection tool), place your cursor between the problematic characters, hold down the Option key on Mac or the Alt key on Windows, and then use the left and right cursor keys to adjust the kerning. Adobe's default kerning increments can be a bit large for small type; you may need to adjust the kerning values manually. Other programs may give you only a manual numeric adjustment. Regardless, the few minutes you spend kerning your type is literally the difference between pay grades when it comes to evaluating the quality of your work.

A Font of Wisdom

Your choice of font for a project is just as important as your choice of lighting, color scheme, and music. There is life beyond Helvetica and Times, and venturing outside those bounds is the difference making your work look ready for a national broadcast spot, or more like a local cable ad.

That said, it is all too tempting to amass a huge collection of fonts – and then pick the most outrageous one you just acquired to use on your latest job. Before you do, think: Does this font reflect the message you’re trying to convey? A gothic Margo Chase font like Vitriol is very cool to look at – but completely inappropriate for a banking spot (plus it’s likely that the more interesting a font, the harder it is to read quickly when you’re trying to convey a lot of information in a hurry).

Figure 2 (below): This font – Vitriol by Margo Chase (available from the type foundry T.26 and font distributors such as MyFonts.com) – is certainly interesting to look at, but perhaps inappropriate for a more conservative client or subject matter.

Sophisticated
Banking

Equally bad is to use too many fonts in the same design. This is often referred to as the “ransom note” effect. Print designers often say you only need three good fonts: A bold one for the headline, a lighter one for the body copy, and a contrasting one – perhaps in italics – for emphasis or variation. Video editors may only need one font “family” provided it has a wide variety of weights. Search your font library for families with both bold and black weights, as these tend to hold up better on video compared to normal or light weights. Better yet, see if the family also offers condensed versions which are invaluable for creating tall titles; proper condensed fonts will look better compared with squeezing the normal font. If you use a very compressed font, make sure it’s readable – you may need to increase the tracking a little to let the characters breathe.

When you’re starting a job, it’s a good practice to think of a theme, and then try to pick a family of fonts that reflect that theme. Take a few common words you expect to be using often (such as the company’s name, as well as buzzwords common to the industry) and repeat them over and over on the same page or subsequent screens using your font candidates so you can see them in context. Also make sure the client

buys off on your selection: Typesetting is a boring job you only want to have to do once; you don’t want to have to kern all of your titles all over again just because you didn’t bother to check with the client first.

As touched on above, readability is a big issue, especially in lower-resolution formats such as web or standard-definition video. That’s why “serif” fonts – ones that have extra details such as feet on the bottom of characters such as “rif” (see the example here) – may not work as well as sans-serif fonts, which are smoother and simpler. Very thin lines also cause problems, either disappearing when compressed, or causing field flicker on thin horizontal lines. And even if your font is technically a safe choice, make sure it’s not so cool as to be unreadable. One rule of thumb is that you should be able to read the text twice before it disappears from the screen. If you can’t, you either need to slow down the pace of your edits, or choose a more readable font.

Figure 3 (below): The font on top is a serif style; note the extra details especially at the feet of some characters. These extra details can cause problem in lower resolution or interlaced formats. The font underneath is in the simpler sans serif file, which is often easier to read.

serif font
sans serif

Zooming Out

There are numerous resources available that will help you improve your typesetting and type design. A classic in the field is *The Mac is Not a Typewriter* (and its companion book, *The PC is Not a Typewriter*) by Robin Williams, which explains basic typographic practices such as the quote and dash issues mentioned earlier. If you prefer video training over a book, check out *Typographic Principles* by Don Barnett and Lynda Weinman, which is available as part of the Lynda.com Online Training Library. (If you don’t already have a subscription, go to www.lynda.com/go/chrisandtrish for a free seven-day pass.) We’ve also just posted on one of our blogs a long list of books and font foundries that we personally find useful on one of our blogs – go to http://provideocoalition.com/index.php/cm_g_keyframes/story/fonts ; the second page contains the

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font links. To see type in action, one good web site to check out is ArtOfTheTitle.com: It will provide plenty of inspiration, culled from across the decades and around the world.

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