

SELECTING THE RIGHT TYPE FOR THE JOB

Type has the power to make or break a job. Every typeface has a distinct personality and conveys a different mood, message, or feeling. Display typefaces, also known as headline typefaces, tend to be stronger in personality, sometimes trading legibility at smaller sizes for a more powerful impact. (Fig. 4–1) Text designs emphasize legibility and therefore are more subtle in design, with personalities that tend to whisper rather than shout. Then there are those typefaces that cannot be categorized and can be used for both text and display sizes.

But there is a lot more to selecting (and combining) a typeface than knowing if it will be used for text or display. Although typeface selection is a very personal and subjective decision, here are some guidelines and unofficial rules that will help you narrow your search and ultimately help you make the right choices.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER

Design Goals

The first and foremost step in selecting a typeface is knowing your goals. As a designer, your primary responsibility is to serve the client using your design and problem-solving skills. It is not to make their job into your own personal award-winning design statement. Personal self-expression to the exclusion of the needs of the project are what fine art is all about, but this is not the goal of graphic design.

Every job requires a different approach. An annual report might call for a typeface with a high degree of legibility that also captures the spirit of the company, but a book cover might need a typestyle that catches the eye and tells a story in a split second, amid a sea of other



Figure 4–1 Every typeface has its own personality and conveys different moods and feelings, some more so than others. Display typefaces tend to be stronger in personality, sometimes trading legibility at smaller sizes for a more powerful feeling.

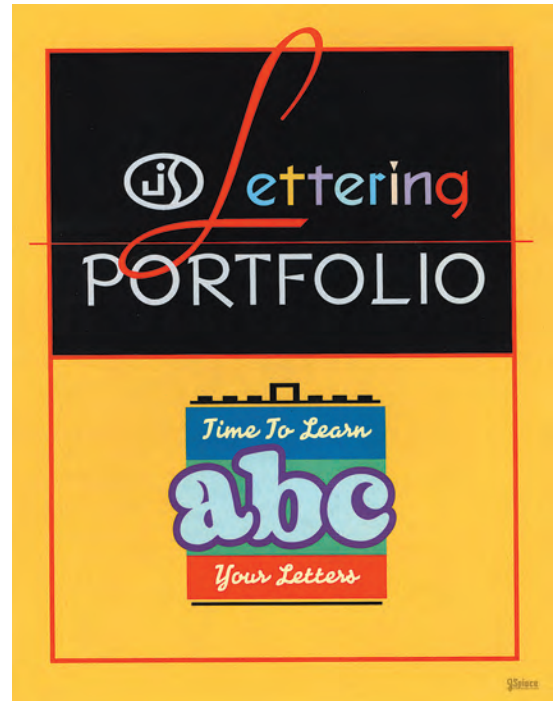


Figure 4-2 and 4-3 These pieces by Jim Spiece combine expressive typography with illustration to convey childlike whimsy (above right) and a very inviting French culinary experience (above). Courtesy of Jim Spiece.



Figure 4-4 The typeface used on this book cover designed by Richard Fahey screams out excitement, danger, and intrigue in conjunction with the illustration. Book covers need to capture one's attention quickly amid a sea of other books, and this one makes its point in a strong way. Courtesy of Richard Fahey.

books. A travel brochure might need to evoke the excitement and flavor of a foreign country, while a textbook or novel might call for a pleasing, legible text face that doesn't tire the eyes after long lengths of copy.

Identify Your Audience

To focus your design goals and subsequently identify the most appropriate typefaces for a job, start by identifying the age, interests, attention span, and other demographics of your audience. Different typefaces (and type treatments) attract a different audience—both overtly and subliminally. Children are drawn to easy-to-read, childlike fonts; seniors to larger settings that have more clarity and readability; teens to edgier, more expressive designs. After you identify your audience, ask yourself how much reading you are asking them to do and what information you are expecting them to walk away with. Once you know the answer to these questions, your typeface choices will narrow considerably. (Fig. 4-2 through Fig. 4-5)



Figure 4-5 The retro vibe is undeniable in both the logo and eye-catching posters for the Terry Shop, an online store dedicated to “all things vintage.” Designer Ed Nacional incorporated an artful blend of contrasting yet compatible typefaces to achieve this. Courtesy of Ed Nacional.



Type Size

Before beginning your typeface exploration, it is important to know its intended type size range. Will it be used for a headline, subhead, running body copy, or all three? Will you be setting very small text for captions or

credits? Or perhaps larger sizes for signage, trade-show booths, or even a billboard? All of these usages require typefaces that are either intended for or useable for these sizes.

For some jobs, you might want to consider the use of a font family or system that works for both text and display. While the foundry or retailer might offer guidelines

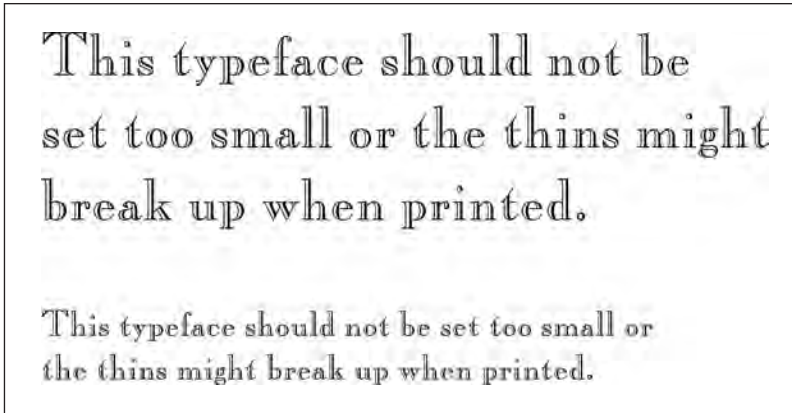


Figure 4-6 Caslon Openface, with its delicate, thin strokes, is a perfect example of a typeface that looks great at 20 point but becomes more difficult to read at 12 point. It also becomes a challenge to print without the thin strokes breaking up.

on the intended size range of a particular typeface family, it is always wise to see for yourself how it looks at both the smallest and the largest of the intended size range.

While some fonts can be adapted to a broad range of sizes with the help of a bit of tracking or kerning, others will either become hard to read or lose the defining characteristics they were initially chosen for. So be sure to do your homework beforehand to avoid any surprises or unwanted results. (Fig. 4-6)

Type Color

The color of the type against its intended background should also be taken into consideration when selecting a typeface, especially with text type. If white or light-colored type is to be dropped out of a dark color or image, the weaker design details (such as thin strokes) might not stand up to any potential ink spread, tint, or color screening, as well as a low-resolution environment, such as the web.

In any scenario where the contrast between the type and the background is not high and the type size is small, choose a typeface (or weight variant) with heavier serifs and/or thin strokes, and a bit more overall strength and punch.

Legibility and Readability

One often hears type described as being legible and/or readable. Although they both relate to the ease and clarity with which one reads type, they actually refer to two different things: legibility refers to the actual design of the typeface, while readability refers to how the type is set.

The legibility of a typeface is related to the characteristics inherent in its design, including its x-height, character shapes, width, stroke contrast, the

size of its counters, serifs or lack thereof, and weight, all of which relate to the ability to distinguish one letter from another.

Not all typefaces are designed to be legible. This is more of a consideration for text designs where the degree of legibility relates directly to holding the reader's attention for the length of the copy. Display designs are generally used for a few words in larger settings where the objective is to be instantly noticeable and to convey a mood, feeling, or message, so legibility might not be the primary consideration.

Readability, on the other hand, is related to how the type is arranged. Factors affecting type's readability include type size, line spacing, line length, alignment, letterspacing, and word spacing. So it follows that a legible typeface can be made unreadable by how it is set, while a typeface with poor legibility can be made more readable with these same considerations. (Fig. 4-7 through Fig. 4-10)



Figure 4-7 These display designs forgo a high degree of legibility for a stronger personality, elaborate and more expressive shapes, and a more distinctive look. When the objective is to be instantly noticeable and to convey a certain mood or feeling, extreme legibility might not be a priority.



Figure 4-8 Counters, x-height, character shapes, stroke contrast, and so forth, all contribute to the legibility of a typeface. These text faces are extremely legible because of their clean, consistent, and uncomplicated design features, which make it easy to distinguish one letter from another.



Figure 4-9 This logo for Greenhood + Company, created by Vrontikis Design Office, trades slickness and readability for an intentional low-tech look, which is in direct opposition to what you would expect from a company specializing in new media and technology. Courtesy of Vrontikis Design Office.

Of all delectable islands the Neverland is the snuggest and most compact, not large and sprawly, you know, with tedious distances between one adventure and another, but nicely crammed. When you play at it by day with the chairs and table-cloth, it is not in the least alarming, but in the two minutes before you go to sleep it becomes very real.

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Figure 4–10 Readability is related to how you arrange the type and is affected by size, leading, line length, alignment, and letter and word spacing. Even a legible typeface, such as ITC Flora, can lose readability when set 14/15. But its readability improves dramatically when set 12/18.

Paper and Surface Considerations

When selecting a typeface for print, take into consideration the kind of paper or surface it will be printing on. This is especially true when the desired typeface has extreme weight contrast with very thin strokes, is an extralight or ultrathin weight, or has small counters which run the risk of closing up. Different papers, surfaces, and finishes take ink differently, and can alter the appearance of the type, making it appear heavier or lighter, and in some cases, start to break it up entirely. For instance, newsprint and some textured papers are very porous and can make the type appear too light, while some coated papers and surfaces such as plastic, Mylar, and glass don't absorb ink well, resulting in type that can appear heavier than intended. Take all of these factors into consideration when selecting a typeface in order to assure the best possible outcome.

Printing Method

Make sure you take into consideration the intended printing method, and what effect it will have on the type—especially the thin strokes and counters. If you are using straightforward offset or digital printing with regular ink and no special effects, the results should be fairly true to the actual letterforms. But when using other reproduction methods, including letterpress, thermography, screen printing, embossing, or the use of metallic inks, the integrity of the letterforms might be affected, resulting in the thin strokes breaking up, counters filling in, or an other unexpected and unwanted outcome.

Low-Resolution Environments

If the type is to be used in a nonprint, low-resolution environment (such as the web), be sure to try it out to see how it performs before making your final selection. You might want to avoid typefaces with very thin strokes, small counters, sharp curves, and extreme angles, any of which might not reproduce well at low resolutions.