

Typography in Internal Business Documents

Typography is the style, arrangement, or appearance of typeset matter—“the visual aspects of written language.” Its goal is to transmit a message as clearly as possible. *Type* began as a rectangular block of metal bearing a character in relief from which an inked print was made. The word, based on the Greek word *typos* which loosely means letterform, came to also refer to the printed letters themselves. While the adoption of electronic typesetting and desktop publishing has led to a blurring of terminology, these basic definitions are still correct.

Typography is an important aspect of any document. It is especially so for internal business documents whose purpose is to inform and/or instruct. Typography can help or hinder the legibility and readability of documents and can even establish their attractiveness so that busy readers will want to study them.

Typographical Elements

The primary element of typography is:

- typeface, a set of types for an alphabet comprising a single design (a type font is a set of types of the same face design and body size).

There are also textual organization elements:

- line length, a result of page width and margins (also called line width);
- line spacing or leading, the space between lines of type;
- letterspacing or kerning, the space between letters in a word;
- word spacing, the space between words;
- text alignment;
- hyphenation; and
- indentation.

And there are other elements:

- rules, straight lines; and
- color applied to type and rules.

These elements can differ for the various parts of a document such as body text, headings, lists, and tables. Mixing typefaces requires care; look for a mix of styles that is both complementary and contrasty.

Typography does not address grammar, punctuation, organization, word use, signs, and symbols.

Typefaces

Typefaces may be grouped into five general classes^{*}: roman, italic, script, gothic, and block. Roman and italics are used for books, magazines, and ordinary reading matter including business documents. There are two styles of these faces, Old Style and Modern. The primary difference between them is in the serif: Old Style serifs are sloping while Modern serifs are straight. All roman typefaces have serifs.

^{*} There is no standard or orthodox type classification. There is an internationally recognized system based on historical origins adopted by the Association Typographique Internationale (ATypI).

Typography in Internal Business Documents

Gothic typefaces have a perfectly plain face with lines of uniform thickness (or almost uniform) and no serifs. (Monoline typefaces have all strokes and stems of equal thickness.) They are widely used for captions and headings. Block typefaces derived from the German manuscript handwriting of the 15th century.

There are other distinctions that can be used to group typefaces: serifs and width. Some typefaces have serifs, some do not. Some typefaces have fixed-width type, some have variable-width type.

A typeface family typically comprises a number of style variations used to emphasize and distinguish different kinds of text. Among these are:

- weight: degrees of bold to light strokes;
- italics, usually with specific design details;
- width: degrees of wide to narrow type (e.g., Helvetica Narrow which is scaled geometrically, whereas Helvetica Condensed and Helvetica Compressed are different variants with a narrower design);
- small capitals (small caps);
- old style figures: numbers with ascenders and/or descenders; and
- titling variants intended for large initial letters and headlines.

Beware of scaling down capital letters and using them for small caps! This is a typographic sin which fails optically because the stem widths do not match and appear grossly inadequate.

The five classes described above are simplistic. There are new typefaces that do not fall into any of these groups, such as Optima, a sans serif roman.

Typographical Design

Composing a typographical design is not necessarily linear. Yes, typefaces are chosen for their legibility, beauty, expressiveness, adaptability, and appropriateness. But a successful composition also addresses how a line of type relates to the page as a whole and involves aesthetic considerations like space, proportion, shape, balance, and order. The proportion and distribution of white space between lines, words, and characters are major factors in determining readability. All typographical elements are knit together to produce a readable, attractive whole.

Designers choose typeface, body size, line length, and leading with the goal of achieving the ideal type *color*. Color in this context describes the appearance of a mass of type on the page, the precise shade of gray created by the visual mixture of black type and white paper, and the visual texture of the mass. The basic feature of good typesetting is consistent color.

When reading is the goal, as it is for internal business documents, the optimal text is smooth, flowing, and pleasant to read. The hallmarks of good text typeface are legibility and readability. Legibility refers to clarity: how easily one letter can be distinguished from another. Readability reflects how well letters interact to form words, sentences, and paragraphs. When evaluating the choices, the goal is *medium*.

For the smoothest appearance, choose a typeface whose letterforms have small variations in width, medium height-to-width ratio, medium x-height, small variations in stroke weight (contrast),

Typography in Internal Business Documents

medium counters, no mirrors*, and no quiriness. Favorite typefaces include Adobe Caslon, Adobe Garamond, ITC Stone Serif, and Janson Text 55 Roman.

Other possible typefaces: Palatino Linotype, Slimbach Book, Times, Times New Roman (overused). Note: Arial and Verdana, both gothic typefaces, do not qualify as they have no variations in stroke weight.

Who Chooses Typography

Book publishers and graphic art firms employ designers who are responsible for typography. But in a typical business, the designer-typographer is a rare role. Thus it falls to the author (or, rarely, editor) to consciously choose typographical elements for their effect.

Typography and Desktop Publishing

Probably the most commonly used desktop publishing tool used today for internal business documents is Microsoft Word. It is a staple item in businesses whose computers use a Microsoft Windows operating system, and is often the only word processor.

Word's default typography is NOT attractive or particularly readable. So authors must override it. Begin choosing a typeface, margins, indents, and leading for the body text. Then use complementary ones for headings, lists, tables, page headers, page footers, and the other parts of the document. Add rules and colors for a complementary, quietly interesting, pleasant effect.

Word's typographical capabilities are limited. It is not especially good at kerning and it can only be established for a style, not pairs of letters. Word cannot do word spacing. It erroneously uses the label "indentation" for "indentation" (tsk tsk). And it is especially poor at leading: A line length of 6" set in 12pt Times New Roman at single line spacing makes for lines that are too tight to be read easily. Be sure to add at least 2 points leading. And consider reducing the body size. Generally, the longer the line, the greater the leading.

Anatomy of Letterforms

The legibility and readability of a typeface is the result of the combined effect of the parts of its letterforms. The color of a typeface is a function of the proportions of letter heights, internal spaces, and stroke weights. Knowing the various parts can inform your evaluation of a typeface's legibility and readability. The following is a list of basic parts.

Baseline: The unseen line that the type appears to be standing on.

X-height: The height of the body, or main element, of the letterform. The x-height is actually the height of the lowercase x.

Stroke: Any lineal element that makes up a letterform.

Stroke weight: The thickness of the line with which the letter is drawn. Typically this line varies in weight within the letterform. Also called stroke width.

Thick-thin contrast: The amount of variation between heavy (thick) and light (thin) strokes.

Stem: The upright stroke of a letterform.

* The letters q and p may be mirrors as may be d and b. The mirror quality makes for difficult reading in text.

Typography in Internal Business Documents

Ascender: The part of a lowercase letterform that rises above the x-height. The letters b, d, f, h, k, l and t all have ascenders.

Descender: The part of a lowercase letterform that drops below the baseline. The letters g, j, p, q and y all have descenders.

Counter: The negative space of a lowercase letterform. A counter may be either fully or partially enclosed.

Bowl: The part of the letterform than encloses a counter.

Serif: Small decorative lines, like feet or spurs, at the ends of the letterform's stem and stroke.

Typefaces that lack a serif are described as sans-serif or sans serif.

Each letter in a typeface has its own little space delimited by horizontal and vertical boundaries. The height of this space is named **body height** and its unit is the point; the height extends from the top of the tallest letterform to the bottom of the lowest one. The width of a letter space, called **character width** or character space, is the actual width of the letterform plus a left and right margin called side bearings or kerning space.

Leading is the imaginary space below the body height that separates one line from the next.