

FOONTS OF wisdom

BY HENRY RUDDLE

Rules of Thumb for the Use and Non-Abuse of Type (part 1 of 2)



The typefaces Johann Gutenberg cast for the first workable offset printing presses in the 15th century were standardized copies of calligraphic forms that had been used by scribes since Roman days.

Over the last 500 years, famous-name type designers such as Nicholas Jenson, Claude Garamond, Christopher Plantin, William Caslon, John Baskerville, Giambattista Bodoni, and, more recently, Ed Benguiat, Hermann Zapf and Sumner Stone (not to mention hundreds of non-epony-

mous ones) have created thousands of typeface families with more categories and variations than you need to care about.

The major categories of type have evolved as:

1. **Serif** – typestyles with short, angled lines at the ends of each letter's strokes; the major varieties include:
 - *Old Style* – Type families such as Caxton or Garamond, as well as neoclassical designs like Bodoni, borrow the Roman ideals of geometric proportion,

appearing precise and even. They tend to change dramatically in their *italic forms*.

- *Transitional* – Greater contrast between thick and thin strokes, with dainty serifs, such as Americana and Baskerville. They are likely to have been designed with more variations such as light, demibold and heavy.

- *Slab Serif* – Instead of elegantly angled serifs, typefaces such as Rockwell and Courier use square serifs and letter forms.

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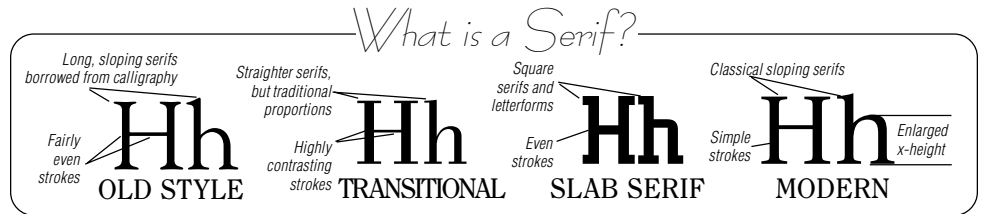
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Fonts of Wisdom

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► **Modern** – Less angled, thicker serifs, combined with a large x-height (see right) for easy reading.

2. **Sans Serif** – means literally “without serifs,” such as **Helvetica** and **Eurostyle**. Popularized by Caslon’s great grandson (William Caslon IV) in 1816, sans serif faces came into their own when the Swiss Bauhaus school of designers got ahold of them in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (“Helvetica” is the Latin word for Switzerland), idolizing their purity and directness. A few “fancy” sans serifs were designed for practical uses such as **MACHINE** and **BANK GOTHIC**. Sans serif typestyles such as **Bauhaus** and **Bernard Fashion** were so



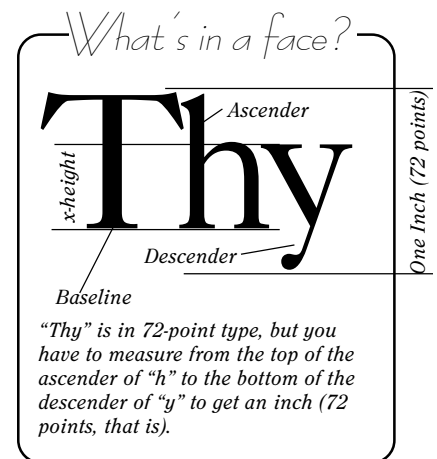
popular during the 1920s they prompted an explosion in display typeface designs.

3. **Display** – sort of the “miscellaneous” typeface category, display faces can have serifs like **ALGERIAN** and **Barl**, and can be sans serif as well, like **PEIQOT** and **Dom Diagonal**. By definition, they are too elaborate for text, but excellent tone-setters and attention-getters at large sizes. They range from script faces such as **Freestyle** and **Edwardian** to wacky advertising faces such as **Harlow** and **Ewie**.

Choosing a Typestyle

As a rule, old style and modern serif typestyles make for the most

readable text in printed pieces. After all, many modern styles were invented to solve specific readability problems, such as **Times Modern** (newspapers), **Schoolbook** (textbooks) and **Stone**



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Serif (300 dpi laser printers). However, in this digital age, sans serif faces such as **Arial** and **Tahoma** are easier to read on a computer monitor.

(For you clever readers – that is, all of you – notice that I've avoided using the word "font." Desktop publishing will probably corrupt the word forever, but, in reality, a font is a set of all the characters for a particular typeface and size, say 10 point Times Roman Italic. Technically, the set containing all sizes of Times Roman Italic would be called a typeface. That set, plus its near relatives – Times Roman, Times Roman Bold and Times Roman Bold Italic – is called a typeface family or typestyle.)

The rules of mixing typestyles have much in common with dressing yourself in the morning. Don't clash. Be consistent. Use things that fit. Specifically where typestyles are concerned, try these rules of thumb:

➤ If the information is more important than the presentation, use a single type family, ideally an appropriate serif style (most

likely a modern face such as **Bookman** or **Century**) or a sans serif face if the material is intended to be read on-screen.

➤ If the design and information are equally important, use complementary serif and sans serif styles (e.g., the proportions of the serif **Palatino** and sans serif **Futura** are similar). Times and Helvetica always work together. Using a serif with a complementary display face can work (e.g., **STENCIL** could be an appropriate headline typeface for a sign company's publication).

➤ If the design is more important than the information, combine complementary serif and sans serif faces with a display type used for accents such as drop caps or pullquotes. For example, old style serif **Goudy**, similarly

shaped sans serif **Gill Sans** and script display face *Shelby* can be elegantly combined.

- Use a serif face for body copy (quasi-serif typestyles such as **Gill Sans**, **Incised** and **Lydian** are OK, too).
- When using a complementary sans serif or display face, be consistent and appropriate. If one photo caption appears in **Helvetica Condensed**, all captions should. In fact, sans serif faces often make a better choice for small type and charts. Display faces, on the other hand, should not be used at sizes smaller than 14 point. ■

Next issue: Part 2, including type proportions, tracking/ Kerning, and more.

Henry Ruddle owns Ruddle Creative, a San Jose-based marketing communications firm, www.ruddle.com, and he started his career as a typographer.

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