ADVANCED TYPOGRAPHY ON THE WEB

With many typefaces poised to become available for use on the web, choosing the right font to complement a site's design will suddenly become another skill that digital designers must master. Here are 9 rules to follow.

BY JASON SANTA MARIA

Until now, using any typefaces on the web—beyond those installed with computer operating systems by default—meant using images, Flash or some other work-around. But browser makers have put the ball in designers' court by implementing the @font-face CSS property, which allows designers to link to any font file and pull it into web pages.

This exposed the elephant in the type foundry: Type makers have largely refused to license their raw typefaces on web pages out of concerns about piracy. The @font-face implementation has brought this concern to the forefront, prompting all parties to figure out a mutually beneficial solution. And many solutions are either already available or in the works, ranging from augmented font end-user license agreements to hosted third-party font services.
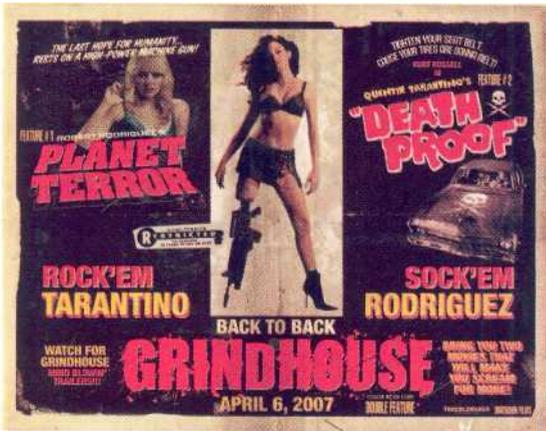
These third-party services, like Typekit and Kernest, and foundries like Typotheque, address these issues in different ways. Typekit, which I'm involved with, works on a subscription model (libraries of retail fonts available for a monthly fee); Kernest has a mix of free and retail typefaces (either as a subscription or download); and Typotheque is a foundry that has released its own hosted solution. Web designers get more options for type, and foundries and type designers make money from their creations. Problem solved, right? Sorta.

BRAVE NEW WORLD

We've been spoiled. Until now, chances are that if you dropped some text onto a web page in a system font at a reasonable size, it was legible. What's more, we know the ins and outs of the faces we've been forced to use. But many faces to which we'll soon have access were never meant for screen use, either because they're aesthetically unsuitable or because they're just plain illegible on screen.

The technical problems with web type also run deep. Inconsistent rendering across browsers and platforms is a substantial hurdle, as are the problems inherent in serving a font file, or more likely a font family: Page sizes can easily jump to 100k and higher.

MIX IT UP
This poster for *"Crindhouse"* uses a mix *of typefaces and styles* to evoke *late '70s exploitation films.*

GREAT BODY
Bobulate.com uses Skolar, designed by Type'lbgelher, served *via Typelzit.*

Old New

JUXTAPOSE
Pairing a transitional *typeface like Baskerville with a more modem face like Futura could create* an interesting statement on the idea of old

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The royal order of the coin

OCT 30, 2009

While the coin may be eventually in danger of going extinct in the United States, it is still at large and very much in play. And while it is, there is a bad habit that needs to be acknowledged. Cashiers the country-over are guilty of it, and it's the violation of the *coin order.*

Let's agree: there is a right and a very wrong way to receive change from a cashier. Whether you're standing, sitting, or crouching through a double-paned plexiglass window, if your change involves at least one bill, and one or more coins (a receipt is a variant), there are simple rules. And when they're broken, the common laws of user-centered courtesy come undone.

Each time I purchase something, I watch the laws come undone a bit more. Cashiers hand patrons coins *on top of our bills* time after time. The coins-on-top method is awkward and wrong: the coins slide off the bills, onto the counter, pennies (which we didn't want back in the first place, frankly) roll onto the floor, nickels one way, dimes the other, and we are left standing with a somewhat wrinkled set of bills in hand. Do we pick up the coins? Were they of value? Why couldn't we have had them in our hand in the first place?

We've all seen this happen to the most dignified of folks, and it's not only painful to watch, but unnecessary.

The royal order
Giving change the right way, like any service design process, takes an understanding of the human, and here it's no different — cashiers are clearly missing what happens when customers receive change. Men throw change in pockets or a tip jar. The end. Bills and receipts get categorized differently depending on their various organizational strategies and attention to detail.

Certain countries use dishes to distribute change in retail shops. Their counterparts in other areas, MUJI for example in the United States, follow this dignified tradition.

But let's assume for a moment that these problems will get smoothed out in short order so that we can focus on what to do after that happens. There's a serious possibility that by gaining access to the world's font libraries, we're opening Pandora's Box. Many people working on the web today have some knowledge of typography, but my hunch is that many web designers are about to feel quite baffled by the new challenges they face.

CONTEXT AND MEANING

Being a web designer will soon require a deeper understanding of typography and how typefaces work. As we move in this direction, our options may be limited at first, but the pool of choices will steadily grow. And as we know, with great power comes great responsibility. Just because you can use the font that looks like it's wearing bell-bottoms, doesn't mean you should.

The system fonts we commonly use, such as Georgia, Verdana and Arial, have become so ubiquitous that any associations we might have with them other than "web" are pretty much gone. The aesthetic expression we were unable to achieve due to scant selection afforded us time to hone legibility on a grand scale. This has largely made the web a "set it and forget it" world, in part due to the rapid state of publishing, but also because we don't have the fine control over typography that we have in print design".

PICKY, PICKY

Using a typeface because it looks interesting might yield acceptable results, but really practicing the art of typography involves understanding typefaces and what they mean. Picking a good-enough face isn't that hard, but choosing an appropriate one that fits comfortably w'ithin societal and technical concerns can be tough.

Notable type designer Zuzana Licko once said, "We read best what we read most." This notion rings true in our learned behavior, but also reveals the reason for the typographer's toughest challenge: Reading is a personal and relative act. Reading a long passage in a blackletter face that was considered readable centuries

"The quick brown fax jumps over the **lazy** dog. Foxy parsons quiz and cajole *the lovably* dim wiki-girL Watch ""Jeopardy*l*'\ Alex Trebek´s fun TV quiz *game.* How **razorback-jumfMiig** frogs can level six. piqued gymnasts! All questions asked by five watched experts — **amaze** the judge.

The quick b**rown** fox Jumps over the lazy dog. Foxy parsons quiz **and cajole the** lovably dim wiki-girl. **Watch "Jeopardy!",** Alex**Trebek'sfun**TV quiz game. How **razorback-jumping** frogs can **level** six piqued gymnasts! All questions asked by **five** watched experts — amaze the judge.

ago would take us considerably more time than if that passage were set in a basic serif face. Most of what we read now is set in simple serif and sans serif typefaces, whether in print or online.

Beyond the question of readability, much of typography comes down to contrast and form. The details of a typeface can inject meaning into a design: Soft lines and stroke weights, for example, can be useful for delicate material or can give an air of elegance and dignity. Those same attributes can be juxtaposed with unexpected content to produce an ironic effect.

As we look to our coffers for new selections of typefaces, the smart money stays on what we know: Find typefaces that are in our general realm of readability—the ones we use and read on a daily basis. Anything that hits on those points on the legibility spectrum will be best, and will be easiest to read. The further we veer away from that, the more difficult our designs will be to read. That's not to say there isn't a wide gray area of legibility.

Here's a list of qualities and methods to keep in mind as you venture into the widening world of web typography:

GO FOR CONTRAST

Contrast is probably the most vital thing to keep in mind. When pairing typefaces, it's important to be able to tell that there are two distinct typefaces in play, but contrast has other uses, as well. Very different typefaces can play off of each other in complementary ways or resist each other to create a bit of tension, while typefaces that appear too similar can weaken the message and confuse a design's visual language.

START WITH TEXT

When choosing typefaces for a website, I like to start by picking a text face for body copy, as this is what a reader will spend the most time looking at. For body copy, look for typefaces that are sturdy and legible at smaller sizes, and for those that have a healthy contrast between characters.

The best text faces generally have some personality, but not so much that it distracts us from the content or experience of reading. Typefaces that have a lot of personality are better reserved for display sizes, as they can become cumbersome to read in longer passages.

FOCUS ON READABILITY

The usual conventions for selecting type apply for on-screen use too, but due to the disparity in quality between the screen and a printed page, those conventions should be followed even more closely on screen, and possibly even exaggerated a little. High x-heights and a strong character body help keep your text legible, even at small sizes. For instance, Verdana and Georgia, both proven screen typefaces, have a larger x-height and a bit more space between the letters so that text retains clarity even at small sizes.

MIRROR THE MESSAGE

One helpful way to understand what you're designing for is to write down a general description of the qualities of the message you're trying to convey, and then look for typefaces that embody those qualities. If you're designing something serious, a playful handwritten display typeface probably won't work. But a sturdy typeface such as Franklin Gothic could convey stability and strength while imparting an air of importance.

One typeface can be enough to say what you need to say, and two is usually plenty. If you're using more than that, have a good reason—like trying to achieve a certain aesthetic, such as replicating the look of an old film or music poster, for example.

PAIR A SANS AND A SERIF

One of the easiest ways to quickly create balance and contrast in typography is to choose a serif and sans serif pairing. It's a simple, easily managed combination that can produce a cohesive look to the text if you select the right typefaces.

It's not a hard and fast rule, but typefaces from the same designer can sometimes work very well together. As in two paintings from the same artist, sometimes you can see the designer's hand in two typefaces they've made. Eric Gill's Perpetua and Gill Sans pair well because they share some of the same strokes and curves. Similarly, some typefaces were made to be paired, like Meta Sans and Meta Serif.

The five boxing wizards jump

The five boxing wizards jump

The five boxing wizards jump

The five boxing wizards jump

Hello
Hello

Combining more than one display or script typeface is generally a bad idea. There are exceptions to every rule, but these typefaces usually have so much personality that one is plenty and two could confuse the mood of the text.

Look for typefaces that were designed on similar principles. For instance, despite looking quite different, Futura and Bodoni can make a great pair because they were both inspired by simple geometric forms. Alternatively, finding two divergent typefaces can create new meaning or an interesting juxtaposition, as long as the contrast is strong. Pairing a transitional typeface like Baskerville with a more modern face like Futura could make a statement on the idea of old

EXPLORE DIFFERENT STYLES

Typeface families with a good selection of weights and styles give you more flexibility without needing to introduce more typefaces. Play a bold off a light or italic weight for contrast, or try all caps or small caps with a bit of letterspacing for a subhead.

If you choose typefaces that only contain a single weight, you may find it difficult to create the contrast that a passage requires to adequately distinguish sections visually.

LOOK TO HISTORY

Many typefaces have an inherent connection with a cultural period or subculture. Depending on what you're creating, this could be an advantage or a disadvantage. It's always best to follow up on potential typeface choices by finding out where, when and for what purpose they were made.

Sometimes a typeface can have the right look but evoke the wrong connotations. For instance, Trajan has been appropriated as the typeface of choice for epic, thriller, romantic, comedy and well, any kind of film, despite being nearly 1,900 years old and Roman. Blackletter typefaces have long been a staple of heavy metal bands or anything that needs to feel scary or dark. Understand these cultural implications so that you can either avoid them or use them intelligently to bring clarity to your viewers.

PREPARE TO PAY

We've been so accustomed to using system fonts that many web professionals balk at the idea of paying for fonts. But even when you use the typefaces that come with your computer, you're using typefaces that you've paid to license—those costs are included in the price of your operating system. There are many free fonts out there, but most of them are free for a reason: They're often fine at display sizes, but kerning and hinting might not be up to snuff and many aren't complete or robust enough to be used in a serious way. Solid typefaces, like almost anything else of quality, usually cost money.

TRUST YOURQUT

Sometimes a pair of typefaces just looks or feels right together, even though you're not sure why. These are guidelines, not Laws: There are myriad types and styles, and you may be surprised by what typefaces work together even when logic says they shouldn't.

The number of typefaces available to us increases every day. If your favorite font isn't available for the web yet, chances are it will be soon enough, though the problem of licensing, delivering and selecting web fonts won't be figured out overnight.

As more typefaces hit the scene, we need to understand how they can best serve our designs, and to push ourselves to move beyond mere novelty in our selections. If much of the web is made up of text—and it is—web typography can be a very powerful tool, indeed. **H**

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FAMILY TIME
Type *families such as Mark Simonson's* Proxima Nova (above *left) contain a variety of weights,* which *can be helpful in creating a design with diverse and flexible typographic* possibilities.

PICK A PAIR
One of the easiest ways to quickly create *balance and contrast in* typography is *to pair* a *serif and a* sans serif. Bodoni and Futura have very *different* looking Lerterforms, *but their structure* is based on the same basic *geometric principles.*