UXPin

Mobile UI Trends Present & Future

Meaningful Mobile Typography

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Meaningful Mobile Typography

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Introduction

Let's be clear about something: Typography for small screens does not mean small type.

The smaller the screen, the more important it becomes to use typography with specific intent and meaning. It starts with a good understanding of the foundation of good lettering. And extends to applying those concepts to smaller screen sizes and thinking about how responsive typography comes into play. (When it comes to type, one size does not fit all.)
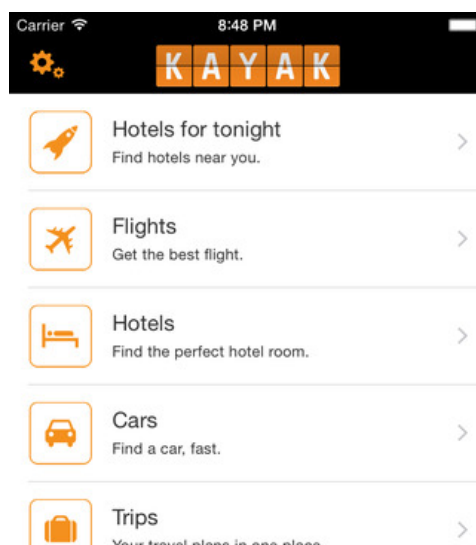

Photo credit: Kayak app

When it comes to lettering, typeface selection is everything. This in-cludes everything from the type family you choose to work with to size and to how typefaces are incorporated into the overall design. While there really aren't any perfect rules – with a good eye and idea of your audience behavior, you can make almost anything work – there are a few common threads when it comes to typefaces for smaller screens.

Body copy is often sans serif

While the trend in mobile skewed toward thin, condensed typefaces with an uber-modern feel, that concept was rather short-lived. Nowadays, typefaces are somewhat thin- to medium-weight with uniform stroke widths. This style of type is easy to read at a variety of sizes and against a number of backgrounds.
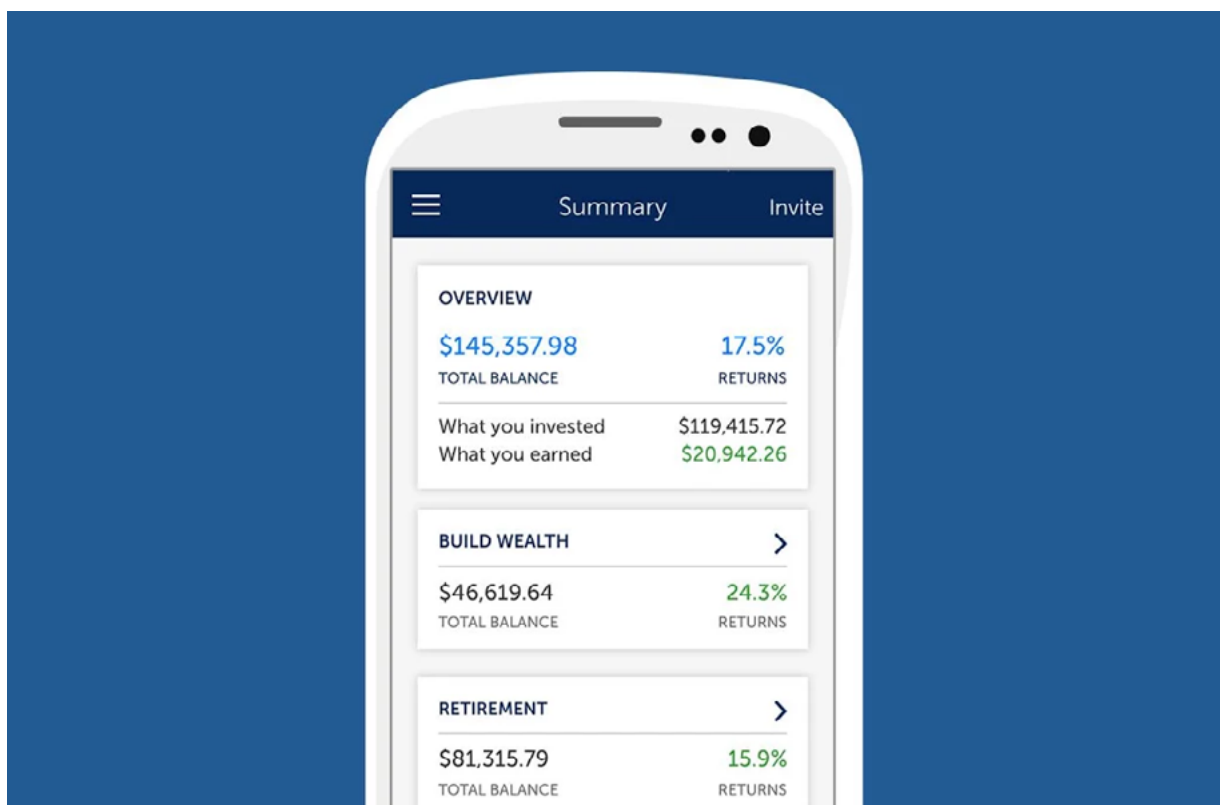
Photo credit: Betterment

One of the arguments for using sans serif is that it is easier to read on screens. Another way to ensure that your copy is readable is to keep it to 30-40 characters per line. Most text is one of three colors – black, white or gray

Again, this comes back to readability. Text needs to be separate from the background whether it is a color or image or video. Avoiding a lot of colored type is an easy way to do that. The common color values used are #0D0D0D, #0F0F0F and #141414.

Photo credit: Fitbit

Look at the example above with Fitbit. The gray lettering is easy to read, even against some of the more subtle gray backgrounds. This contrast without "extreme" contrast can be easy on the eyes, especially when it comes to digesting a lot of information. Font size and readability matters.

If you're building a website, responsive typography is a must because you'll want whatever typeface you choose to scale properly across devices After all, the same 16-point type looks quite different on an HD monitors and smartphone screens.
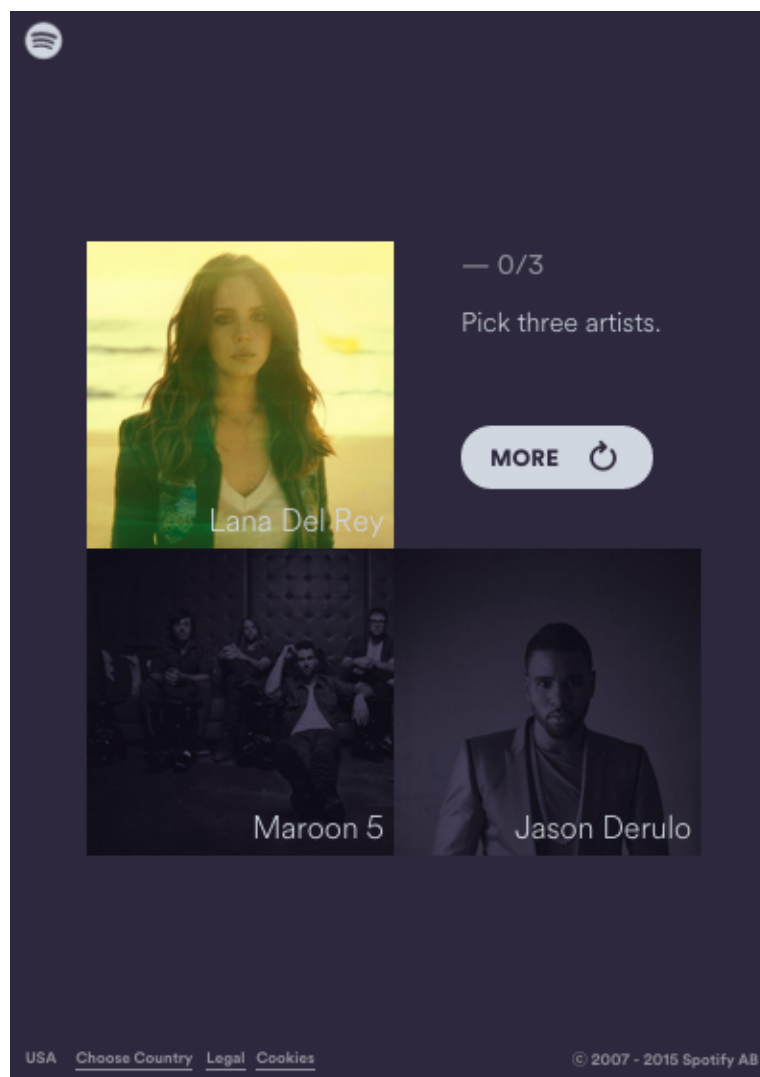

Photo credit: Spotify

Select a typeface with smooth edges for optimal readability. Avoid styles that are overly elaborate, such as scripts or novelty styles. Another thing to consider is web font integration. Many tools, including Google Fonts and Adobe's Typekit, have built in integration for apps and responsive websites. Take advantage of these tools when building your sites and opt for high quality typefaces, which will most likely scale better.

With these common threads in mind, let's dive deeper into using typefaces in mobile.

Give Words Some Space

When it comes to type, space is a make-or-break element. Too much space can make type feel miniscule or out of place on the screen. Too little space and text becomes difficult to read and also feels small and cramped.

As recommended in Mobile UI Design Patterns, you have to find that sweet spot in the middle.
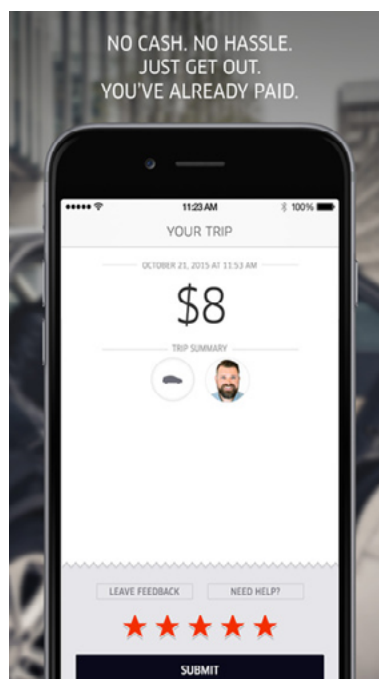
Photo credit: Uber app

Unfortunately, that's not something that's easy to define. You almost need to see it to know it. While Uber and Twitter use space in two very different ways, they are equally efficient and increase the readability of the typography. Uber (above) goes the route of giving text plenty of space, almost to the point of excessive space, which brings very distinct attention to its calls-to-action.

Photo credit: Twitter.com

Twitter, on the other hand, allows text to practically fill the screen, so users can access as many 140-character messages at a time as possible. Both are very different, but both make quite efficient use of nice typography in conjunction with other design elements to make it work. Just imagine the two designs flipped, how would you feel about the typography then?

Here's some practical takeaways:

- The smaller the font size, the more space your text needs to be perfectly legible. Many designers like to start with 1.5 times the point size of a specific font for the space between lines, or leading. (Fans of the golden ratio extend that to 1.618.)

- But don't stop there – consider additional space between paragraphs or different kinds of text elements.

- When it comes to space and typography, space should provide the right amount of buffer for each readable thought. Think of space as the place where readers pause before moving on to the next idea. If you want elements to read together, keep the space a little tighter, but when the idea or concept changes, add a little extra space and give users time to digest what they have read before moving on to the next thing.

- Finally, when it comes to building a typography framework, think of the words as bricks. Each word is a brick and the space between is mortar; even if the blocks are of varying sizes the space between each is rather uniform. This visualization can help you establish visual guidelines for how words should look, rather than what they say.

Pay Particular Attention to Alignment

Left, right, justified? When it comes to alignment, don't overthink it. In most cases text should be aligned to the left margin with a ragged right side or centered.


Photo credit: Dark Sky app

Avoid justified text. It can get hard to control, with odd (and distracting) spaces that form between words or letters. Ragged text has a more natural feel to it and helps maintain consistency in lettering. It's easy and comfortable to read, and won't leave odd design gaps due to varying column widths.

How do you know when to center or when to left-align text?

- **Use left alignment for larger blocks of text.** Anything that requires actual reading should be left-aligned. Left alignment also works nicely for text elements that fall into a grid, card-style containers or in chunky blocks of text that are supposed to be read together. (Think Twitter: Each text element is 140 characters or less, but most users read multiple text elements back to back.)

THE ONE
THING I
ALWAYS
FORGET TO DO
WHEN I TRAVEL
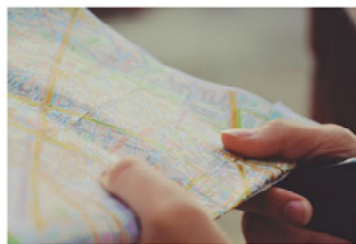
You guys, I consider myself to be a pretty organized traveller. I compartmentalize my clothes into packing cubes so everything will be neat and tidy, I double ziplock all my toiletries so that nothing will get wet if a bottle of shampoo explodes, and I keep all my electronics with their

Photo credit: http://thatbackpacker.com/

- **Use center alignment for special, short bits of text.** Centering can be the perfect solution for a headline or simple call to action. Center placement is also a popular choice for buttons because users can easily reach them with either thumb.

Another option: try mixing centered and left-justified options, especially when there's very few words. This technique works well with a centered headline and ragged body text. The contrasting alignments make for a natural and easy reading experience. This is a popular technique with blogs, such as That Backpacker, a popular travel blog. When text is aligned well, users will easily be able to consume your content. If it's out of whack, users won't waste their time trying to read what's on the screen.

Create Subtle Contrast

This might go against everything you have ever heard – tone down the contrast a bit. You don't have to use solely black type on a white background to make content readable. One of the reasons for this is backlighting in relationship to the amount of text on the screen.

Think about Amazon's Kindle e-reader for a moment. It is the standard in readability among digital devices. And it uses shades of gray to display text and backgrounds.

This same concept applies to many of your favorite websites as well. Eventbrite and Airbnb use a color and contrast frameworks that emphasizes subtle grays, rather than stark black and white for backgrounds and text. Both sites are super easy to read – so much so that you probably don't even think about it. Both websites use white text only when it is on top of a photo or video background that provides ample contrast, but without being too stark.
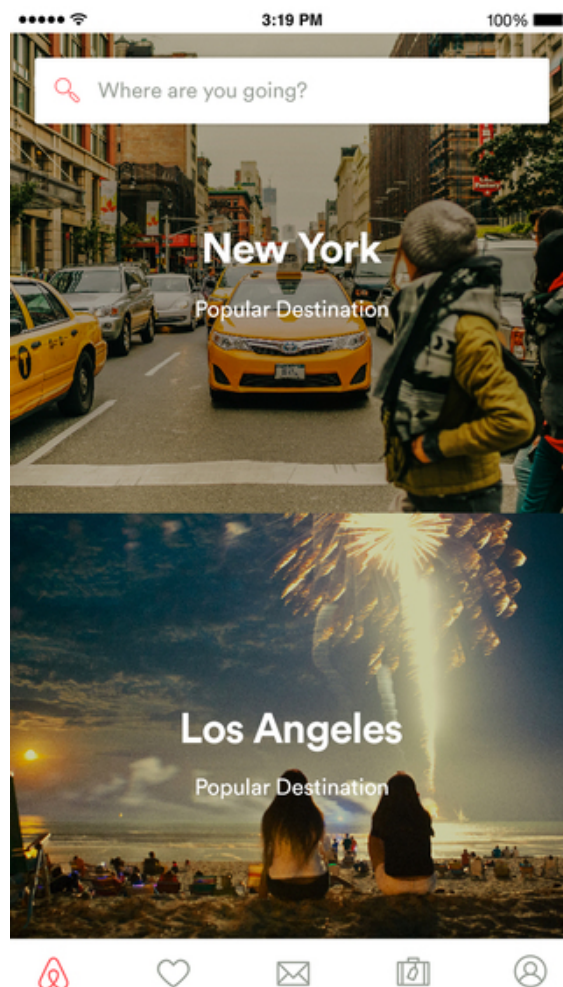

Photo credit: AirBnB App

In terms of contrast, the most important consideration may actually be size. When it comes to size, there are no simple answers. That's because it hinges on the size of the device canvas. It is best to think about typography size in terms of how wide the canvas is in relationship to how many characters fit across the screen. While standard font sizes have been creeping upward, about 40 characters per line is a good place to start, as we said earlier.
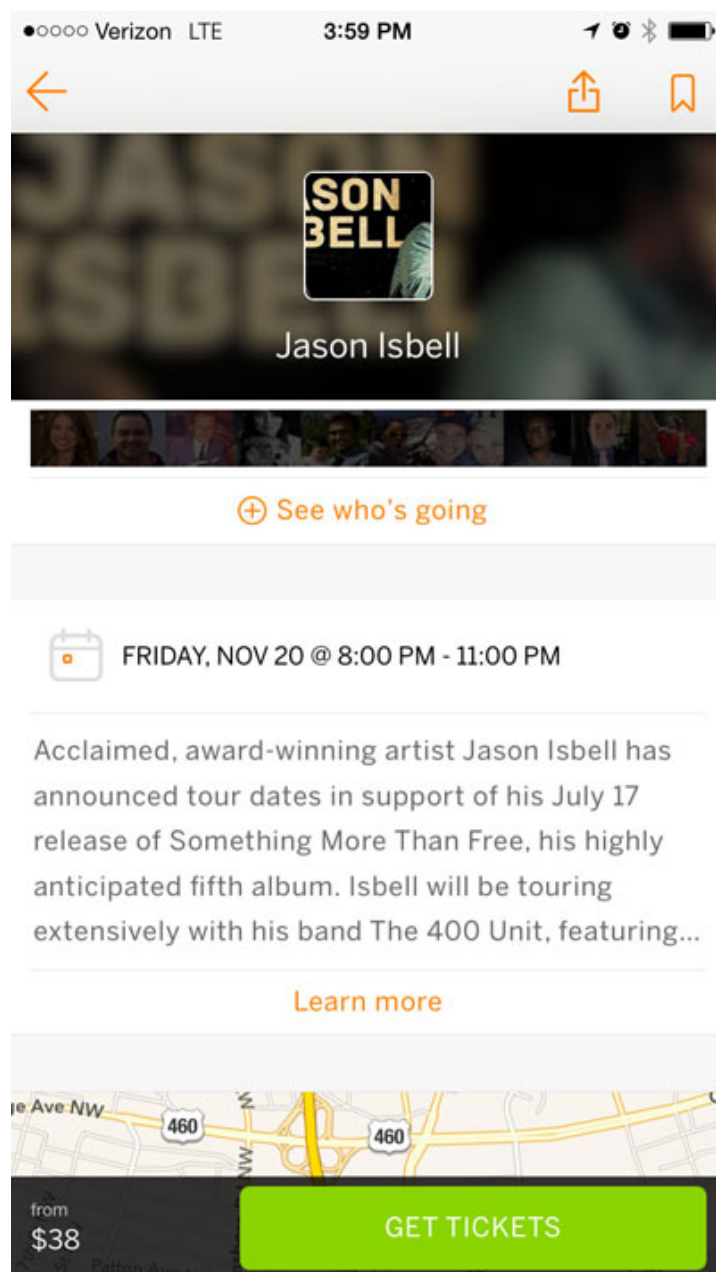

Photo credit: https://www.eventbrite.com/

Users should not have to pinch and zoom to read the words on the screen.

This character count mirrors the flow and readability standards of physical items, such as books and magazines. The smaller the canvas, the smaller the character to width ratio.

This concept is why many larger designs, such as newspapers and magazines, use multiple columns to maintain a reader-friendly experience. And the optimal character to column width for body text is around 40 characters, proving that everything old is new again.

Design Hierarchy
(But Maybe Fewer Levels)

Photo credit: Vox.com

To further enhance the reading experience, designers are downsizing the levels of text in their designs. On mobile, the hierarchy tends to focus on two type styles and sizes – a headline and body text. (Second-

ary elements, such as links or subheads, are becoming less common or tend to mirror one of the main two styles.)

When it comes to creating hierarchy for most types of design, you look from left to right and top to bottom. he primary concern on mobile is vertical rhythm. Few designs contain more than one block or column of text, so the user can ease though one bit of typography to the next in the course of scrolling.

You need text that is easy to read and establishes a single thought without the user having to do a lot of swiping or tapping to understand the message.

Generally, typographical hierarchy is rooted in general visual hierarchy. In fact,standard HTML include typographical tagging for scale fall under this: H1, H2, H3, H4, H5 and so on. When it comes to small screens, you can forget all those levels. In many cases, two levels of type are enough. As stated before, you need headlines and body copy. Deep levels of hierarchy only really work if you can see all of those elements at once. The visual scale for typographical hierarchy – based on size, color, weight and space – is designed so the eye knows what to read first. On smaller screens, there is only one (maybe two) thing to view or read at a time, making all those typographic levels unnecessary.

Photo credit: https://flipboard.com/

The Flipboard app does a nice job with type hierarchy. The website actually uses three levels of typography – headline, byline and body text – but the middle one is dropped on some screen depending on the type of content. The type design uses a serif body font, which is elegant and somewhat unusual for this style of website,along with a sans-serif headline. The end result is highly readable, and almost book-like.

All this boils down to keeping hierarchy simple with mobile typography. A headline and body copy is all you really need.

Don't Force It

Typography will look different on smaller screens. It's just that simple. So don't try to force it to conform to what you are planning for larger screens. This is an easy thing to say but it's more difficult to do, especially when you want to create a uniform experience across all devices.
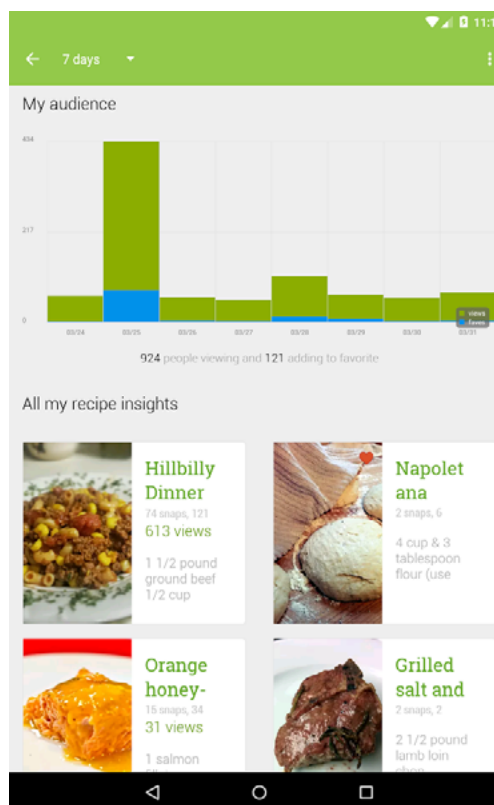

Photo credit: Allthecooks app

When it comes to typography these elements will be different based on device:

- **Type size:** Think about typography in terms of ems, rather than point sizes. This is especially important for responsive design since you want to think about type that's scales responsively.

- **Line breaks:** Different numbers of characters per line for different screen sizes practically ensure that lines will break in different places. Don't obsess over it unless there is a concern about reader flow.

- **Colors:** Sometimes the perfect color combination on a large screen just does not work for smaller sizes. You can make a change. Remember to consider grays.

- **Font selection:** Because of the likelihood of a more limited font palette, some elements will be streamlined to include the same typefaces, and that's ok.

- **Orientation:** Be wary of turning or flipping text to make it work. Users find text that is horizontally oriented easier reads.

- **Kerning:** Just don't touch it when it comes to working in responsive frameworks. It's near impossible to make changes that work well universally. You are better off to invest the time in selecting a high-quality typeface that auto kerns for you.

What's Next for Mobile Typography?

For responsive sites and mobile apps, thin is out. Medium and medium condensed are becoming much more popular. MyFonts keeps a running list of the most popular fonts. Among the top 10 are Proxima Nova, Museo Sans, Pluto Sans, Helvetica Neue and Futura. All are medium weight sans serifs with somewhat condensed letterforms.
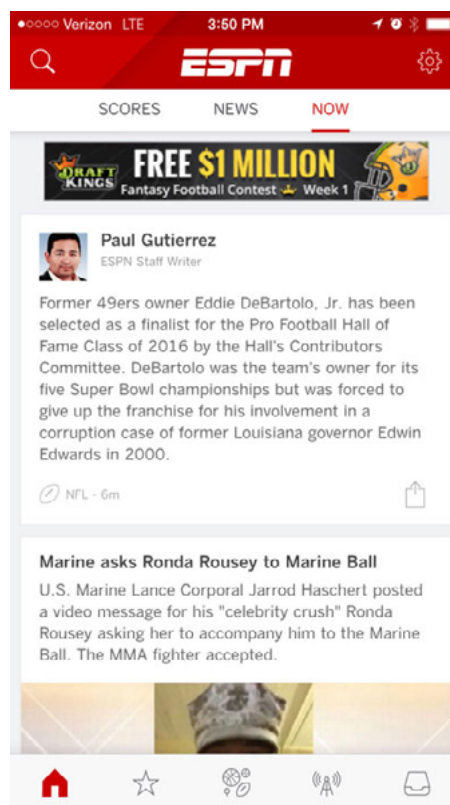

Photo credit: http://espn.go.com/

The pendulum shifts to smaller typefaces again. When the trend line included thinner, more condensed typefaces, text was often used in more exaggerated ways to make up for a lack of readability. But as the focus has shifted back to typefaces that are highly readable at almost any size, designers are opting to go a little smaller.

ESPN (above) is one company doing just that. The text inside the "News" section of the app is somewhat small, but remains readable. The text features darker bolder headlines and lighter gray text with plenty of space between lines and a subtle hierarchy. The typography is designed so that it's easy to read in blocks.
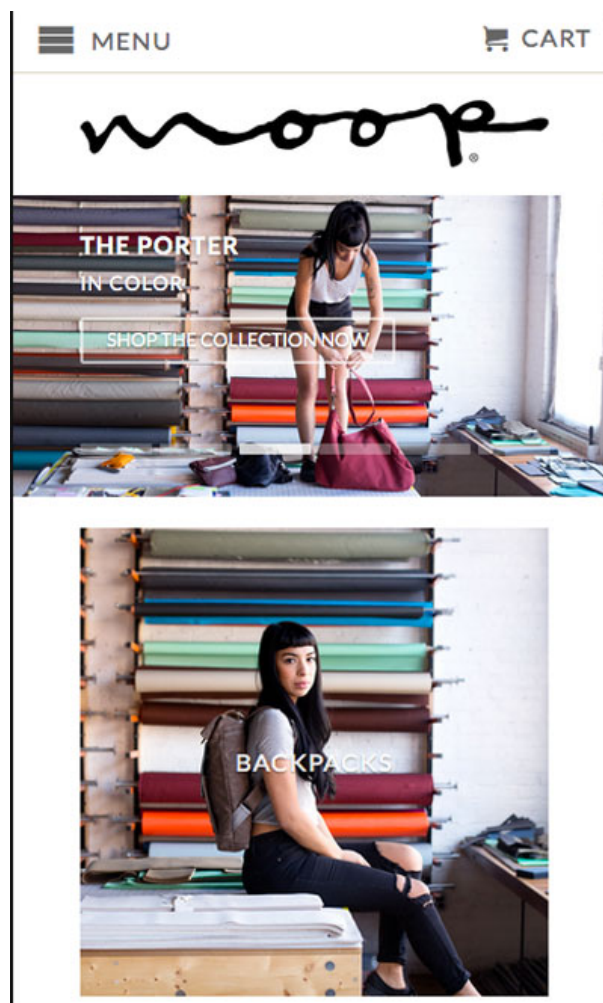

Photo credit: http://www.moopshop.com/

Link management has always been an issue on mobile devices. For a long time, inline links have just been too hard to activate. Designers are starting to figure out nice ways to work around this. And while it is less about typography, it is a typography-based characteristic. Card-style interfaces are starting to emerge as a solution to this. Each card includes a well-designed bit of type with the entire block serving as a link.

Moop (above) does this well. Every block is a dedicated link. This includes the ghost button in the header and every block showcasing one of their bags in subsequent blocks. While the design is not perfectly card style per se, it uses those concepts to manage links with ease to create an experience that is easy to navigate with thumbs.

Photo credit: Waze

App typography will set the tone for everything else. Apps are leading the way when it comes to design and typography. Look at things, such as the popular Waze, which features a rounded, almost bubbly sans serif in the logotype and a smaller medium weight sans serif for everything else.

Apps have started to change the design culture in other ways as well. Some of the things designers are using for e-commerce and information sites started in apps and games. Elements – such as more monotone background and colored type combinations – have long been used to help increase usability and playability in these types of sites.

Prototype better mobile design in UXPin (free trial)

10 Excellent
Resources & Tools

1. Modular Typography Scale

2. "Responsive Typography with Sass Maps" by Smashing Magazine

3. FlowType.JS plugin for managing type based on container width

4. "Responsive Typography: Using Type Well on the Web" by Jason Pamental

5. Apple iOS Color and Typography Guidelines

6. Google Material Design Typography Guidelines

7. CSS with Vertical Rhythm

8. "A More Modern Scale for Web Typography" by Typecast

9. Golden Ratio Typography Calculator

10. "The 10 Best Google Fonts for Print, Web and Mobile" by Creative Bloq

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