A Pocket Guide

Combining typefaces

by Tim Brown

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Why combine typefaces?

Why would anyone bother using more than one typeface?

Designers can, and often do, use a single variation of one typeface (for example, Proxima Nova Regular) for entire projects. This is a common exercise in Typography 101 classes because it helps students understand typesetting options and limitations, and it's a popular aesthetic among professionals who are in a hurry, trying to be plain, or trying to be careful. Even sticking with a single typeface (for example, the complete Proxima Nova family) provides a multitude of possibilities, particularly if that face offers many weights, widths and styles.

The act of bringing different typefaces together to convey a message is challenging, inspiring and fun. And it gets the job done—finding good type combinations can give form to our emotional goals and serve the practical needs of our compositions in ways that sticking with a single typeface cannot. Plus, learning to combine typefaces is one of the best investments a designer can make: it teaches you how to be selective, patient and reasonable about design decisions.

But combining typefaces is also hard work. It takes practice, and it takes the wisdom that comes with practice. It takes knowledge about type, context and culture. Successful combinations are partly a matter of good taste, which comes with experience but is tough to develop. And finding typefaces that work well together often takes more time than we (or our managers, or our spouses!) think it should.

It can be quite frustrating, but that's a good thing. Hard work is good for the soul, and striving for a palette of typefaces that is appropriate for a given project is a rewarding exercise. By trying, we grow knowledgeable; and by having tried, we grow wise.

With practice, we can combine typefaces more intuitively and with better results.

> *"As a rule, impeccable taste springs partly from inborn sensitivity: from feeling. But feelings remain rather unproductive unless they can inspire a secure judgment. Feelings have to mature into knowledge about the consequences of formal decisions. For this reason, there are no born masters of typography, but self-education may lead in time to mastery."*
>
> – Jan Tschichold, *The Form of the Book: Essays on the Morality of Good Design*

This Pocket Guide will give you a framework for successful practice, lead you to founts of knowledge, and help you judge the work you see, including your own work. The first two chapters are brief bits of background information. The second two chapters are full of practical advice, and the final chapter is a critique of found type combinations.

A few quick disclaimers: I'm only familiar with typesetting English text, so my advice may be insufficient if you're setting text in another language. I'm also a web designer at heart, so my perspective on typography as a whole is centered on the principle of progressive enhancement—that a text itself is fundamentally more important than our suggestions about how it should be typeset. Lastly, I am part of the *Typekit team at Adobe*, so I have more experience with typefaces available via our service than I do with other typefaces. My writing and examples will reflect these things.

Let's get started!

1

Type

Combining typefaces is a heck of a lot easier if you know a few things about type and typography. This handful of principles and resources is a great way to get to know any typeface: research its designer; anatomy; family; classification; and the jobs it does best.

Designers

Typefaces are made by people called type designers, and any typeface worth using has an invisible back story of love and labour. Type designers call their businesses type foundries in homage to the craft's history in metal casting, but this term also conveys the hard work and concentration involved in making type. Usually, a type foundry comprises just a few people. The better you know these folks, the better you'll know their type.

MyFonts' Creative Characters newsletter directory.

Since 2007, MyFonts has interviewed type designers about their lives and work in a series of newsletters called *Creative Characters*. Some of these interviews are also available in *physical book form*. Another book worth checking out is Alexander Lawson's classic *Anatomy of a Typeface*, which profiles more than thirty typefaces' individual histories, including information about their designers.

Anatomy

Parts of typefaces have names. Knowing how to describe the forms and features of a typeface helps you identify it, notice relationships between it and other fonts, articulate your criticism, associate adjectives with the face, and zoom in on small details (great for identifying graphic harmony—more on that in chapter 4).
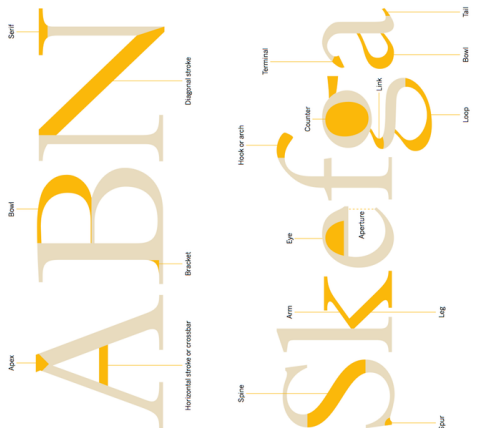
Just like the human body, the Latin alphabet can take on a surprising range of shapes and proportions. These varieties can come from diverging historical paths, differences in language or culture, or simply the tool used to make the letters—whether it's a pen, a chisel, or a compass.

But there are enough constants in roman (upright) letterforms that a standard vocabulary can label its parts. Using terms that are familiar to everyone who knows basic human anatomy, we can describe and compare typefaces. For example, most roman-based typefaces have an uppercase "R" with a leg. Some legs are perfectly straight, some are bowed, some have an undulating curve, and some end with a "foot" (or serif) on the ground (baseline). Each of these characteristics can contribute to the overall appearance of a typeface—how it changes the look of a word, a paragraph, or a page. And, just as importantly, they can be functional characteristics, telling us what a typeface is capable of.

There are many terms relating to type anatomy that have the same meaning across the typographic community. Chances are, when you say "leg," or "serif," or "baseline" everyone will know exactly what you mean. But there are other terms whose definitions vary, and there are designers and writers who will use different words for the same part of a letter. For this book, we use terms that are as widespread and common as possible, and that help us identify the distinguishing parts of each typeface.

Parts of typefaces and their names, from *The Anatomy of Type*, pp10–11.

FontShop and Typedia have nice glossaries, but actually drawing letters is the best way to learn typeface anatomy. Check out Erik van Blokland's TypeCooker, or the type basics section of Underware's typeworkshop.com, and try sketching. If you can find a copy of Lettering for Advertising by Mortimer Leach, pick it up. These resources will explain why parts of typefaces look the way they do based on the tools or methods used to draw them.

Stephen Coles examines Eames Century Modern in *The Anatomy of Type*, pp74–75.

It also pays to compare a variety of different typefaces' features to one another. Stephen Coles' *The Anatomy of Type* examines one hundred typefaces, pointing out their idiosyncrasies, contrasting them with similar typefaces, and adding a few words about each one. Pound for pound, one of the sharpest and most useful type books around.

Families

Typefaces with more than one style are called type families. Small families may include just a few variations, while large families can cover an enormous range of styles.

On the left, four styles of News Gothic; on the right, twenty-four styles of Kepler.

News Gothic Regular
News Gothic Oblique
News Gothic Bold
News Gothic Bold Oblique

Kepler Light
Kepler Light Ital
Kepler Regular
Kepler Italic
Kepler Medium
Kepler Medium
Kepler Semibo
Kepler Semibo
Kepler Bold
Kepler Bold Ita
Kepler Black
Kepler Black

Kepler Semicon
Kepler Semicond
Kepler Semicon
Kepler Semicond
Kepler Semicon
Kepler Semicon
Kepler Exten
Kepler Exten
Kepler Exten
Kepler Exten
Kepler Exte
Kepler Exte

Adobe's *News Gothic* has just four styles (regular and bold, each with an oblique), while the *Kepler family*, also from Adobe, comprises a whopping 168 individual styles with widths ranging from light to black, weights from condensed to extended, and optical styles for captions, subheads and display use. Superfamilies incorporate multiple related typefaces, like *FF Scala and FF Scala Sans*.

Classification

Grouping typefaces by their features helps us keep them organized, but type classification can be extremely confusing because it's so subjective. Still, classification teaches us how to look at typefaces through the lenses of form, history, artistic movements, and our colleagues' ideas.

The most sensible and objective thoughts you'll find on this topic are: Robert Bringhurst's take in *The Elements of Typographic Style*, which organizes type by artistic movement; Jonathan Hoefler's article for Emigre, *"On Classifying Type"*, if you can locate a copy; and Indra Kupferschmid's article, *"Type classifications are useful, but the common ones are not"*.

Jobs

Different typefaces do different jobs. It's tempting to use any font at any size, in any context, but we can better understand typefaces' strengths and weaknesses by considering how they were made to be used.

GgGgGgGg
Rag Rag

Above, optical styles of Garamond Premier (Display, Subhead, Regular and Caption); below, Antenna Extra Condensed and Antenna RE.

Many typefaces were created to solve a specific design problem. Text faces are designed to knit multiline text into a smooth block of words that can be read comfortably. Font Bureau has even made "*Reading Edge*" versions of some of its typefaces—like *Antenna RE*, meant for use at text sizes on coarse, low-resolution screens (compare to the rest of the *Antenna family*). Similarly, typefaces designed for display use (at large sizes) try to catch readers' attention with energetic strokes, fine detail, and idiosyncrasies that would be lost at smaller sizes (or worse, would spoil the reading experience). Adobe offers some of its original typefaces with optical styles—meaning the same typeface (say, *Garamond Premier*) has been drawn in several different ways for use at different size ranges (Garamond Premier *Display*, *Subhead* and *Caption*).

If you can't find information about how your typeface was meant to be used, or if it's billed as an all-purpose typeface, look at how it has actually been used successfully—see if it's listed at *Fonts In Use*, or visit the foundry's site and try to find examples of the typeface in use.

2

Context

Readers expect web text to be everywhere and anywhere. The web is changing our understanding of typography, so the way we think about combining typefaces also needs to change. We need to think about compositions not as layouts, but as coordinated chunks of typeset elements that do specific jobs and exist in many states simultaneously, shifting dynamically among those states.

Our success in combining typefaces is directly related to how well we understand the jobs being done in our compositions, and it also depends on our realization that making separate typesetting decisions for each of the web's many contexts is neither practical nor possible.

Chunks

A few short paragraphs ago, in chapter 1, we talked about the jobs that typefaces do. Compositional chunks are like job openings, and just as in the work world, the better you understand the job you need done, the more successfully you'll fill the position.

From left to right: Evening Edition sets FF Meta Serif for comfortable reading; RISD Shared Voices uses Benton Sans for striking display type; and Skinny Ties employs FF Enzo for all kinds of interface odd jobs.

Is the chunk you're typesetting supposed to be read comfortably? Or is its purpose to catch and direct readers' attention? Is it informational, meant for readers to pore over and reference? Is its purpose to help people navigate, or gather data quickly? Whatever it is you're trying to do, a typeface was made for that purpose.

Type specimens, reviews and descriptions can all help us figure out why typefaces were made and what they're good for (more on that in chapter 3). Foundries, tools and web font services often group typefaces by use, too—like "intended size" at *Webtype* and the paragraph and heading buttons at *Typekit*. And once in a while you can find a nice feature, article or blog post about fonts for specific uses, like the *good for long form Typekit list*, or Billy Whited's posts on *setting type for user interfaces*.

Shifts

Because compositions must shift to accommodate different contexts, chunks will be rearranged and reshaped. Different typefaces might need to be employed for the same purposes because the conditions in which they were chosen—and worked well—no longer exist.

When the thin parts of Benton Modern Display get too thin (as this set arrangement scales), the heading switches to Benton Modern RE.

The Famous Bedtime Story Books

The Adventures of Grandfather Frog

by THORNTON W. BURGESS
illustrated by HARRISON CADY

I
Billy Mink Finds Little Joe

The Famous Bedtime Story Books

The Adventures of Grandfather Frog

by THORNTON W. BURGESS

When we talk about combining typefaces, we're not only talking about using different fonts for different elements in a composition—we're also talking about using different fonts for the same typographic element across a composition's many contexts. Readers probably won't see different contexts simultaneously, but consistency across multiple visits is valuable, as is a consistent experience for readers of all contexts.

What does this mean, practically speaking? It means we need to define a range of acceptable limits within which particular typefaces will do their jobs. To articulate those limits, we need to pay close attention to the sensors we have at hand, *as Mark Boulton put it*, and the systems that allow us to act on data from those sensors. And we need to consider a project's entire compositional continuum at once, as we evaluate our typesetting choices in different layouts and contexts.

Choosing typefaces

Read any article or book about mixing fonts (this one included) and you'll hear some or all of the following advice: stick with a single type family (making use of its various weights, widths and features); use a superfamily that includes sans and serif siblings; limit yourself to a specific historical period; use typefaces from the same type designer.

That's all fine advice because it makes adequate combinations easy to identify. But it also robs us of the opportunity to truly understand why a combination works or doesn't, and can lead to a false sense of completion. The task of combining typefaces doesn't begin or end with any single piece of advice—it is necessarily more complex, and dependent upon a project's design goals.

Have real goals

When we do design work, we have reasons. We are responding to specific problems, and we have emotional goals in mind. We know the content we're working with inside and out, and we know why it exists. Real design scenarios and the goals that drive them give us the authority to eliminate type combinations that might be perfectly acceptable in a different scenario with different goals.

Bree is a whimsical, sturdy sans that looks great with Abril Text (both faces from TypeTogether), but it felt too complicated in this case. Bree is fantastic for short headings, brief copy and navigation, and I was setting longer headings.

Are you typesetting bits of news? A blog? Reference material? What kind of visual hierarchy does your content require? Will some element clusters (h3 + paragraph) appear more frequently than others? Factors like these affect the presence and use of different typefaces, which in turn affect the balance and density of type in your composition.

Choose an anchor typeface

One typeface will anchor the other(s). It'll help set the underlying tone of your experience, and act as a reference point for every element in your composition. Find it early and know it well.

Kepler, Rooney and JAF Bernino Sans (from left to right) are excellent body text typefaces.

Kepler Std Regular

Text sample – CSS font-size (px) with 1.4em line-height

18   Is not the best kind of originality that which comes after a sound apprenticeship? That which shall prove to be the blending of a firm conception of, "useful precedent"…

16   Is not the best kind of originality that which comes after a sound apprenticeship? That which shall prove to be the blending of a firm conception of, "useful precedent" and the progressive…

14   Is not the best kind of originality that which comes after a sound apprenticeship? That which shall prove to be the blending of a firm conception of, "useful precedent" and the progressive tendencies of…

13   Is not the best kind of originality that which comes after a sound apprenticeship? That which shall prove to be the blending of a firm conception of, "useful precedent" and the progressive tendencies of an able mind. For, let…

12   Is not the best kind of originality that which comes after a sound apprenticeship? That which shall prove to be the blending of a firm conception of, "useful precedent" and the progressive tendencies of an able mind. For, let a man be as able & original as he may…

11   Is not the best kind of originality that which comes after a sound apprenticeship? That which shall prove to be the blending of a firm conception of, "useful precedent" and the progressive tendencies of an able mind. For, let a man be as able & original as…

10   Is not the best kind of originality that which comes after a sound apprenticeship? That which shall prove to be the blending of a firm conception of, "useful precedent" and the progressive tendencies of…

Rooney Web Regular

Text sample – CSS font-size (px) with 1.4em line-height

18   Is not the best kind of originality that which comes after a sound apprenticeship? That shall prove to be the blending of a firm conception of, "useful precedent"…

16   Is not the best kind of originality that which comes after a sound apprenticeship? That which shall prove to be the blending of a firm conception of, "useful precedent" and the progressive…

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12   Is not the best kind of originality that which comes after a sound apprenticeship? That which shall prove to be the blending of a firm conception of, "useful precedent" and the progressive tendencies of an able mind. For, let a man be as able & original as…

JAF Bernino Sans Regular

Text sample – CSS font-size (px) with 1.4em line-height

18   Is not the best kind of originality that which comes after a sound apprenticeship? That which shall prove to be the blending of a firm conception of, "useful precedent"…

16   Is not the best kind of originality that which comes after a sound apprenticeship? That which shall prove to be the blending of a firm conception of, "useful precedent" and the progressive…

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12   Is not the best kind of originality that which comes after a sound apprenticeship? That which shall prove to be the blending of a firm conception of, "useful precedent" and the progressive tendencies of an able mind. For, let a man be as able & original…

Make your body text typeface the anchor if possible, because this text represents a majority of your content—and because text faces are built to withstand a variety of settings, whereas display faces can rarely be used at small sizes or at coarse resolutions.

Choose a face that reflects the subject matter, suits your design goals, performs well in the contexts that matter to you, and is understated relative to other visual elements you'll employ. With those considerations in mind, let the selection of this anchor typeface be emotional. That emotion will guide you as you seek to expand your project's palette of typefaces, and can help motivate you to study the typeface with care.

Absorb the text

You can do several things to drum up the kind of emotion that will help you choose a solid anchor typeface. First of all, and most importantly, you should read the text you'll be typesetting. Seriously. Wait—no, no, don't skip this section. Read the text. Take notes. Think about what the author is saying and consider how you want to convey those ideas.

But of course, for you to read the text it needs to exist and be available to you. That's not always possible, and sometimes on purpose; as *Mark Boulton explained*, fast-moving editorial environments demand a more flexible authoring model. Mark goes on to list ways that he goes about understanding the structure of forthcoming content, including one approach that has always worked for me: talk with the author and other stakeholders about how they want readers to feel.

As luck would have it, Christopher Murphy and Nicklas Persson just wrote *[A Pocket Guide to the Craft of Words](#)* for Five Simple Steps:

> *"In much the same way as we gather visual inspiration at the outset of our process, we might also begin to consider gathering verbal inspiration when we embark on a project. These verbal palettes or wordboards can help us define a design's tone and voice and, as we'll see shortly, are every bit as important as look and feel."*

Here's the bottom line: absorb the text and the author's or client's intentions with vigor, because it is integral to your success. If the visual decisions you make aren't meaningfully connected to the ideas they represent, then your typeface combinations don't matter.

Absorb the type

Finding emotion in type is simple for us typographers: we look at type specimens, read what others have to say about the face(s), and make our own notes (mental or otherwise) about our impressions. It's a very visual, visceral activity. It's lucky for us that, unlike texts, typefaces are most always ready and waiting to be appraised for their potential emotional contributions to an experience.

Type specimens come in one of two varieties: tailor-made specimens that showcase typefaces based on a designer's taste; and ready-made specimens that exhibit faces in standard ways (like the *web font specimen* I made freely available in 2009, and wrote about in *"Real Web Type in Real Web Context"*). Both are useful: tailor-made specimens often highlight characteristics of the faces that are unique or otherwise worth special attention; ready-made specimens help us compare faces.

"Real Web Type in Real Web Context" at A List Apart.

Whatever specimens you find most useful, make the most of the time you spend with them by taking notes about what you see, and keep one eye on a specimen as you read what people think about the type.

Descriptions of typefaces by their designers and distributors can be extremely valuable. *Hoefler & Frere-Jones*, for instance, does an exceptional job of showcasing its typefaces and describing why their form and features matter. You can learn a lot about type and typography from H&FJ typeface descriptions, even if you don't plan to use H&FJ typefaces.

Not all type designers are equally gifted at articulating their intentions, and not all type designers spend equal amounts of time promoting their wares (or do an equally talented job of it). Less talked-about typefaces are not necessarily less carefully produced, less thoughtful, less beautiful, or less suitable for robust use. But they are harder to identify than typefaces that have received tasteful attention.

Lucky for us, plenty of articulate, talented people are so enamored with type that they spend time getting to know it and are willing to offer an eloquent opinion. Stephen Coles' *Typographica type reviews* have offered a reliable source of smart perspective for years, including an annual collection of reviews of new typefaces from a variety of knowledgeable critics. Early in his tenure as creative director at Typekit, Jason Santa Maria initiated a series of review-style blog posts called *About Face* that has been carried forth by guest authors.

There is also much to be gained by talking with type designers. Every face, and every designer, has a story. See the Designers section of chapter 1 for research tips. You might also check out Elliot Jay Stocks' *8 Faces* magazine, featuring interviews with type designers and answers to the question: "If you could only use eight typefaces for the rest of your life, which would you choose?"

As you listen to the stories you find, pay close attention to what drives the type designer, including any goals they had for the construction of a specific typeface, the design challenges they hoped the typeface could address, and the time periods involved (when the face was created, and the eras from which it draws influence).

While attending my first *Type Con* (which, by the way, is another great way to get to know type and type designers), I asked a handful of folks—including Matthew Carter, Jean François Porchez, Jackson Cavanaugh, David Jonathan Ross and Doyald Young—to explain why they draw letters the way they do. I assembled their fantastic and varied answers in a Typedia article called "*Drawing Letters*".

Typographica by Stephen Coles.
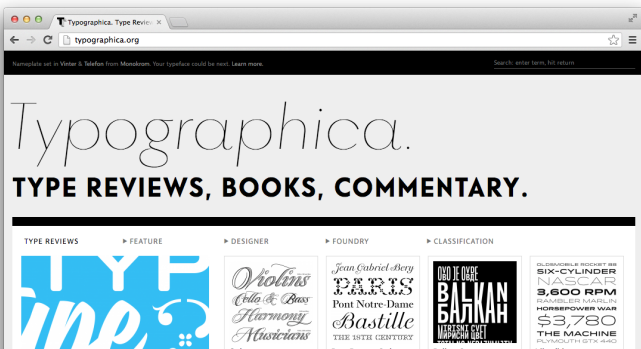
Finally, a lot can be discovered about typefaces' backgrounds and histories by spending time with the letterforms themselves. In *The Elements of Typographic Style*, Robert Bringhurst wrote:

> *"Letterforms have character, spirit and personality. Typographers learn to discern these features through years of working first-hand with the forms, and through studying and comparing the work of other designers, present and past. On close inspection, typefaces reveal many hints of their designers' times and temperaments, and even their nationalities and religious faiths. Faces chosen on these grounds are likely to give more interesting results than faces chosen through mere convenience of availability or coincidence of name."*

Check technical details, then set the type

When you find an anchor typeface that works for you, do a thorough background check to be sure it will meet your needs in practice. Make sure it has the features and language support that you need. Understand how you would need to manage each font's character set in terms of file size and feature access; with *sparse browser support for CSS OpenType features*, some typefaces' small caps and alternate glyphs are available separately.

Examine browser sample screenshots to check *type rendering*, or better yet, look at web font specimens in something like *Browserstack* and on different devices. If you don't have an *open*

device lab nearby, or if you'd prefer to have your own private device lab, check out *the minimum viable setup Brad Frost recommends*.

Next, set the type the way you'll want to use it. Gather some real (or very close to real) content, then apply your anchor typeface—and any other typefaces you wish to evaluate—just as you would in the actual project where you plan to use them. Spend a fixed amount of time making a handful of broad decisions about the typesetting, and resist the urge to finesse.

Find typefaces that complement the anchor

After you've chosen and set the first typeface, survey your project's outstanding needs and look for typefaces that can serve those needs while complementing the anchor typeface and bolstering your emotional goals. Now is a fine time to grab a cup of coffee (or your beverage of choice).

Finding compatible types can seem daunting. But the more you do it, the easier and more rewarding it becomes. Look around. Have fun. Go with your gut—make loose visual choices. We'll narrow them down later. If you're worried about wasting time, set a time limit (say, one hour) for type exploration. If you don't know how to get started, scan these resources:

Fonts In Use

"Fonts In Use is a public archive of typography indexed by typeface, format, and industry. We document and examine graphic design with the goal of improving typographic literacy and appreciation."

Type Connection

"Type Connection is a game that helps you learn how to pair typefaces. […] The game features well-known, workhorse typefaces and portrays each as a character searching for love. You are the matchmaker. You decide what kind of match to look for by choosing among several strategies for combining typefaces. Along the way, you explore typographic terminology, type history, and more."

The FontBook app

"The world's most comprehensive typographic reference tool, documenting the libraries of over 130 international type foundries who publish the works of more than 1,660 type designers. FontBook App covers nearly 37,000 typefaces from 8,000+ font families."

By the end of your exploration you should have anywhere from a handful to a dozen type combination possibilities (don't worry if they seem ugly—give 'em a chance), and your beverage should have mysteriously disappeared. In the next chapter, we'll reduce this set of possibilities to a smaller set of viable candidates and explore them in detail.

4

Judging combinations

You should now have a solid foundation: design goals; a close relationship with your content; an anchor typeface grounded in your emotional goals for the piece; and an assortment of companion typefaces to try out.

Finding successful typeface combinations in a reasonable amount of time takes practice, but practice can take an unreasonable amount of time if you're not careful. The purpose of this chapter is to help you develop a routine for meaningful, efficient practice in combining typefaces.

Narrow down your choices

Just as you did with the anchor, check the technical details of each typeface, then try it with real content. Get familiar with this process, because it can quickly reveal important information that makes or breaks a possible combination. But *do not* start researching each typeface.

If you're anything like me, you'll be itching to repeat chapter 3's *absorb the type* for each of the companion typefaces you've chosen. Don't do that yet, for two reasons. First, it's a time sink; type historians can spelunk typeface after typeface—and so can you, in your spare time, but your task here is to make a choice and start using the type.

Second, you are already invested in your anchor face; absorbing more typefaces before you try them tends to psychologically lock you into a combination before you are happy with it, visually. That can leave you fighting to *make* it work, pitting research-based rationale against your design goals and aesthetic sensibilities.

If the companion typefaces all pass your tech check, congratulations! You can skip the next paragraph and start evaluating the type.

If no typefaces from the initial set became viable candidates, it's back to the drawing board. Don't give up! Even though your first round of exploration didn't pan out, you found a handful of interesting typefaces. Take notes about your favorites and why they didn't work. Then schedule another hour of exploration, grab another refreshing beverage, and hop back to chapter 3's *find typefaces that complement the anchor*.

Identify graphic harmony

If you have at least one viable candidate for combining with your anchor typeface, you're ready to begin a thorough evaluation by actually setting type and studying what you see. Just as you did in chapter 3 (*check technical details, then set the type*), set the type the way you'll want to use it, with real content.

Here, we're not just looking at type—we're looking at type from various distances (super-macro to super-micro) for the purpose of deciding whether several typefaces, arranged in a particular way and together with our content, produce something that looks good and makes sense.

Studying the symbolic, graphic expression of letterforms and the interplay of texture, rhythm, proportion, and shape in typesetting has entertained and empowered typographers for centuries. Spend as much time as you can afford on this part.

Study texture (super-macro)

Squint at your typeset text, or back up a bit. Distance yourself from it enough that you stop seeing words, and instead see gray masses that vie for attention in the composition by taking up space, being very active or exhibiting contrast.

If the shade of every typeset chunk looked equally dark, this layout's texture would feel too smooth.

Observe the typographic color of each gray typeset chunk relative to the rest of the composition to judge the composition's texture. If a marker element (head or pullquote) that's supposed to stand out has color (meaning, a shade of gray) that is indistinguishable from the color of the body text, then it's probably not going to be as successful as it would be if it were much lighter or darker and provided appropriate compositional contrast.

Now come a bit closer to the text so you can see it more clearly, and examine the visual activity generated by your text, set in these typefaces. Do you notice any pressure points? Does the text feel too jumpy or too relaxed for the content you're typesetting? It should be pretty clear now why using real content is important—depending on the language and style of the content in your project, different textures will be evident in this typeset text.

Watch for awkward letter combinations and wonky spacing. Gauge how dynamic the type feels within its space, and consider how that feeling changes as you view the layout from different distances.

studio located in Sea
available for travel. W
and creativity to each
an intimate dinner pa
Our goal is to learn yo
your vision; then desi
you and incredibly be

Choose from any of our ma
talk with us about finding a

studio located in Sea
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your vision; then desi
you and incredibly be

Choose from any of our ma
talk with us about finding a

Study rhythm (macro)

Look at the white shapes within letters, and between letter combinations. With your eyes, loosely measure the volume they consume, and how regularly those volumes of black and white repeat themselves in a series of letters. Worthwhile typefaces will have a black-white rhythm that feels steady and organised. Read Gerrit Noordzij's *The Stroke* and think more deeply about these spaces.

It's feasible that typefaces could be combined purely on the grounds of compatible rhythm—a speedy, syncopated heading with a steady paragraph underneath, like layers of music. Or a dry display face with lively text. Heck, you might want the piece to feel dreary overall, full of typefaces with very dull rhythm. Or you might be trying to make readers feel anxious with a concoction of lively, jittery, expressive types. Do the typefaces you're examining now have a rhythm that works for you?

On the left, Adelle Extra Bold Italic's robust black strokes and narrow white spaces introduce a powerful rhythm that might blend well with Skolar's aperture-heavy, meant-for-reading rhythm if Adelle were used for headlines and Skolar for text. On the right, Ronnia Condensed Thin has a mellow, consistent rhythm, while Droid Sans feels deliberately loose (fonts made for UI and signage often do); perhaps display type set in Ronnia, with Droid Sans for navigation, would do well as a match.

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Study proportion (micro)

Now, get very close to the letterforms. For this part, don't look at type through the same long- or mid-range lenses you did in studying texture and rhythm. Look at it more closely and more abstractly. Enlarge or isolate the type. Look at specific letters—the same ones, from each of the typefaces you're looking to combine. Try an *uppercase R* and a lowercase a for starters.

What you're trying to find are compatible proportions. If you can identify typefaces that share common structures and spatial divisions, then many other aspects about the letterforms, such as their shapes and features, can differ because they are deeply related by proportion.

The resources in chapter 1 are extremely useful here—particularly for understanding the anatomy, history and classification of your typefaces. Proportions in letterforms come from their structure, which is intimately related to their means of production and their place in history.

Find compatibility in things like x-height, extender length, character width, aperture sizes and stroke contrast; clockwise from top-left: FF Dagny, Franklin Gothic URW, Acuta and Sommet Slab.

Rag Rag
Rag Rag

Study shape (super-micro)

Still looking closely, study the shapes that letterforms are made of, and the spaces they create by being assembled in various combinations. Do the shapes seem to be based on geometry, or the movement of a writing implement? Are the shapes angular? Smooth? There are many abstract qualities to explore here, in terms of line quality and contour.

Again, an understanding of typeface anatomy and classification is helpful here, because the way we describe parts of letters and similar styles of type are conventions based on people having studied shape in detail, just as we're doing.

Remember that compatibility and similarity are not the same thing. For example, a square and a circle are very different shapes, but both are strict geometric forms that have more in common with one another than either has with a more calligraphic shape.

Clockwise from top-left: Leitura News, Prenton, Utopia Display, and Ratio.

Lend a helping hand

Sometimes it takes a bit of graphic assistance to make typefaces work together, like a mutual friend that can introduce one typeface to another. Devices like these are a boon to any designer tethered to brand guidelines, strong imagery or other demanding graphic elements with which the typesetting needs to coexist.

Line thickness, angles, shapes, spacing, rhythm, proportion and more can be used to help coordinate compositional elements. Dan Mall wrote a brief, excellent post at 24 ways, called *"Type-Inspired Interfaces"*, about finding relationships like these.

Chaparral heading with Source Sans text; bullets and em dashes from Chaparral Light Italic subtly reflect the heading's angular features, while their weight and spacing harmonize with the text.

End of the Trail

— • — • — • — • — • — • — • — •

The rain slanted down in sheets and the broken plain, thoroughly saturat
held the water in pools or sent it down the steep sides of the arroyo, to fe

Evaluate combinations from different perspectives

Looking at typeface combinations in different ways can help you see things you wouldn't normally notice. Mix it up to facilitate your scrutiny.

Look at them juxtaposed
Simply comparing typeset texts is a dead simple way to make incremental improvements. Position windows next to one another with something like *Divvy* or *Moom* (or *the Show Windows feature of Windows 8*). Use key commands to quickly flip among windows or tabs with alternative choices. This is a great way to compare and iterate on everything from typefaces to sizes, spacing, color, arrangement—you name it.

Look at them backwards
Like squinting or stepping back a few feet from your work, looking at texts backwards (flipped horizontally, as if you were inside your monitor looking outwards) can help you more accurately judge their overall balance and density because it obscures typesetting details. If you're working in a browser, check out Nathan Ford's

bookmarklet, *Flippant*. If you're working in an image editor, it shouldn't be difficult to find a setting that flips the canvas horizontally to achieve the same effect.

Look at them later

Take a break. Wait a while. Revisiting your work with fresh eyes and renewed energy almost always results in better judgement (tip: this works for any kind of problem-solving or decision-making, not just typography).

Look at them with other people

Get others' feedback about your work. Check out Cassie McDaniel's A List Apart article, *"Design Criticism and the Creative Process"*— particularly the *"What is good feedback?"* section. Post your work-in-progress in a community like *Dribbble* and encourage others to talk with you about why it works or doesn't. Chapter 5 might help you find words to describe the typesetting you're talking about.

Go forth and typeset

However you look at them, evaluate combinations as part of your normal workflow if possible—in code or in your favorite application. The craft of typesetting web text is young, and there is no right way to work. I maintain a growing list of tools and resources that you may like to try, at *Nice Web Type*.

Nice Web Type, by yours truly.

5

Critique

Looking closely at typefaces can help you describe them with words, which are a useful abstraction—we can mix adjectives like a cook mixes flavors, to find great-tasting combinations. Let's take a brief look at five sites and the type combinations they use.

Contents Magazine

Slender and cosmopolitan *FF Meta Serif* is the anchor typeface for *Contents Magazine*. Set loosely, it makes the composition feel spacious: line lengths grow long, and line-height stays generous, kept in check by Meta's neatly structured letterforms and the brisk pace generated by its combination of narrow characters and ample counters.
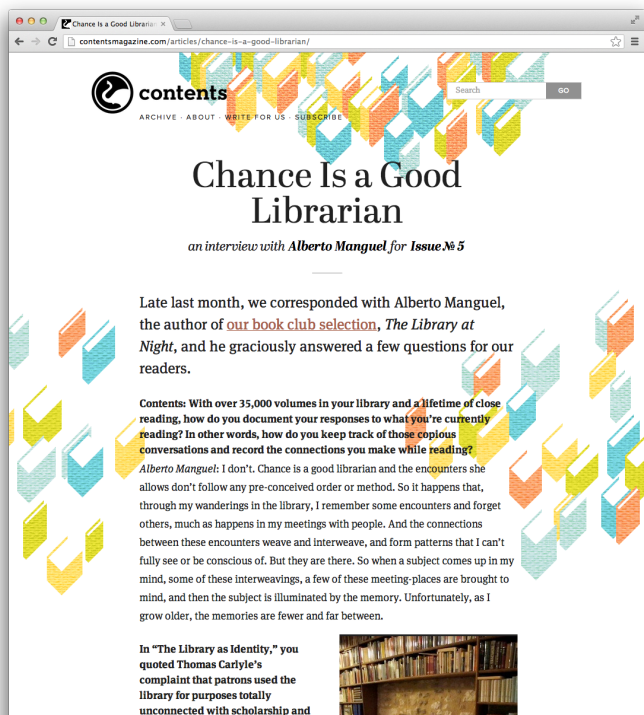
Headings set in the romantic, serifed *Abril Display* introduce a touch of warmth, whimsy and thoughtfulness to Contents' otherwise bustling and well-ventilated atmosphere.
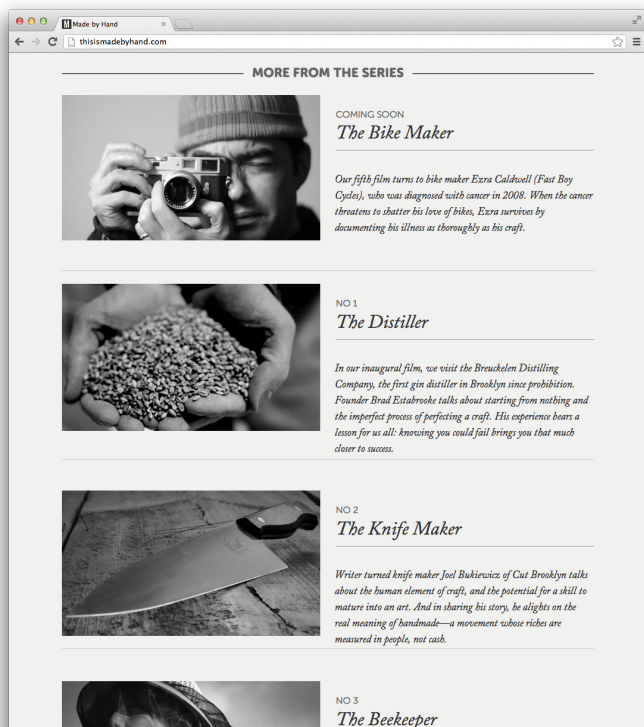
Although these are two very different styles of serifed type, Contents' colorful, high-contrast background patterns help bring them together by mimicking their respective line qualities and rhythms.

Abril Display and FF Meta Serif come together with help from the background patterns at Contents Magazine.

Made by Hand

Made by Hand is a series of short films that aims to promote goods made "locally, sustainably, and with a love for craft", and its typefaces are more closely connected to the aesthetic of the films than to each other. For that reason, the films lend a critical helping hand to the success of the type.

─────────── **MORE FROM THE SERIES** ───────────

COMING SOON
The Bike Maker

Our fifth film turns to bike maker Ezra Caldwell (Fast Boy Cycles), who was diagnosed with cancer in 2008. When the cancer threatens to shatter his love of bikes, Ezra survives by documenting his illness as thoroughly as his craft.

NO 1
The Distiller

In our inaugural film, we visit the Breuckelen Distilling Company, the first gin distiller in Brooklyn since prohibition. Founder Brad Estabrooke talks about starting from nothing and the imperfect process of perfecting a craft. His experience bears a lesson for us all: knowing you could fail brings you that much closer to success.

NO 2
The Knife Maker

Writer turned knife maker Joel Bukiewicz of Cut Brooklyn talks about the human element of craft, and the potential for a skill to mature into an art. And in sharing his story, he alights on the real meaning of handmade—a movement whose riches are measured in people, not cash.

NO 3
The Beekeeper

The texture and detail of *Adobe Caslon Italic* matches the level of detail in the films' close-ups of raw materials and craftspeople. That closeness necessitates a limited focal range, and so at the blurry end of the spectrum is *Museo Sans Rounded*—an unobtrusive sans with low contrast and rounded corners that, helpfully enough, mimic the minimal Vimeo interface that houses Made by Hand films.

The rhythm of black and white vertical shapes in *Tungsten* reflects the steady pace of the films—they don't hurry, but they don't linger either. The content of the films is straightforward and honest, and so are the typefaces chosen to represent the films.

Still from *The Cigar Shop*, with its title set in Tungsten.

Uncrate

Uncrate is not beautiful, but beauty isn't a prerequisite for successful typeface combinations. For a project with lots of content, a no-frills aesthetic, and a format crammed with attention-grabbing ads, photos and headings, this design does a good job of feeling organized—and that has a lot to do with its typefaces and how they're used.

In short, the designers behind Uncrate chose appropriate typefaces for the jobs that needed to be done. *Alternate Gothic* does what it was made to do—catch readers' attention in short bursts (here, it's used for headings and navigation). Likewise, *FF Tisa* is excellent for body text.

That they look decent together is a product of Alternate Gothic's plain style and the type having been sized and spaced carefully amid a crowded composition that feels less careful by comparison.

The Grey Barn and Farm

Type plays a tasteful supporting role at *The Grey Barn and Farm*. Here, unlike at Contents Magazine and Made by Hand, there is less of a formal visual connection between the type and the composition's primary visual treatment; the type is isolated from the photography, but it works well.
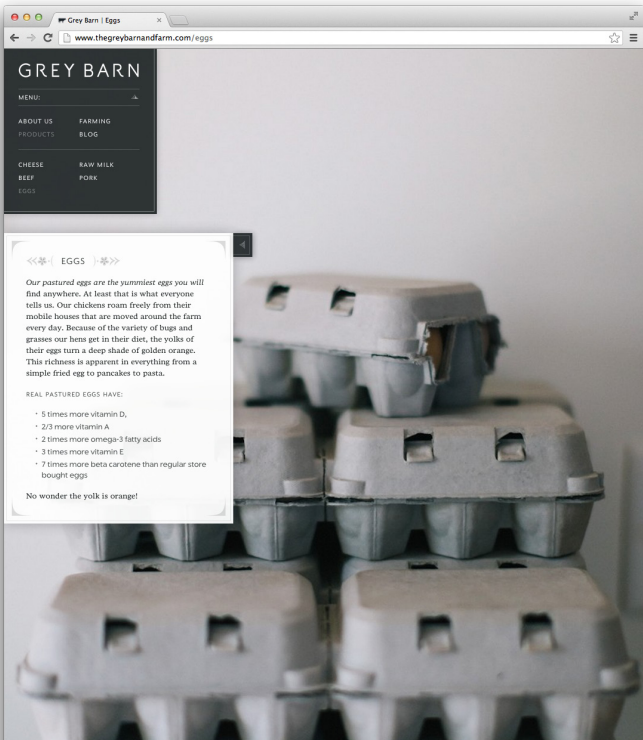
Poynter Serif RE and *Apres RE* share a similarly wide stance, with short extenders and generous spacing. The fonts' sizes also appear to match, thanks to a typographic adjustment; although Apres is larger than Poynter, it has been set smaller at The Grey Barn and Farm.

These fonts may have little in common with the photography, but just like farm food and fresh air, they feel like a natural fit with each other.

Apres RE (above) and Poynter Serif RE (below) work well together because of their proportions.

farming

farming

Art of the Title

Art of the Title is a showcase of film title sequences. Its typography has to be accommodating—a platform for the varied content it is helping to showcase. If you've ever tried to typeset a portfolio, you're familiar with this challenge.

Art of the Title's index of title sequences demonstrates that anchor typefaces needn't strictly be text faces; even when type is used for short captions in a grid of images, it sets the tone for an experience.
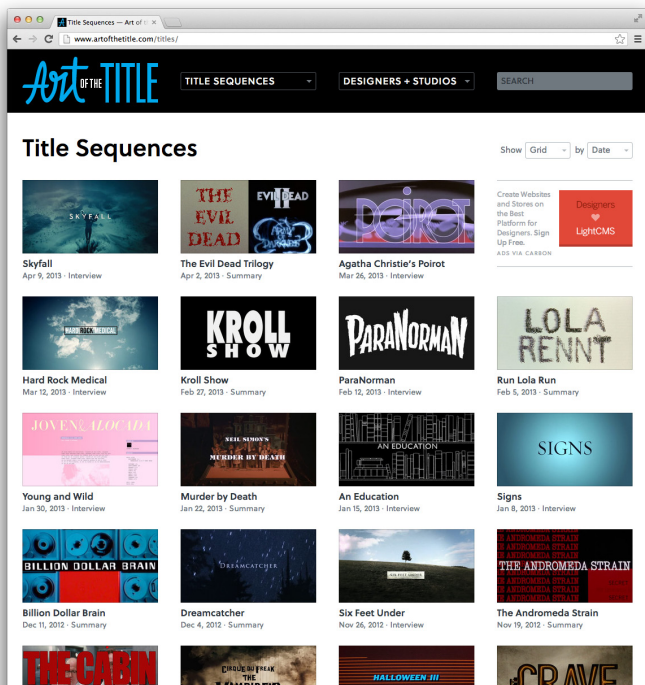
Geometric sans serif typefaces are great for this job, and *Soleil* is no exception. Neutral and balanced, it clearly and quietly supplies structured information in the form of navigation, film titles and metadata.

However, Art of the Title is more than a list of films and facts. Critiques and interviews are set in *FF Meta Serif*, a contemporary serif worthy of representing thoughtful, articulate reviews and capable of delivering both praise and disappointment with fairness and grace.

The contrasting texture generated by these two typefaces is key to the composition's success—Soleil's soft geometry plays a supporting role as FF Meta Serif and the video content are featured, and each typeface appropriately addresses the jobs of its chunks of text.

FF Meta Serif strikes a welcoming, conversational tone, while also conveying authority about the subject matter.

Conclusion

I don't want this Pocket Guide to end just yet, but here we are. The process became more open-ended as we went along, and ended up unfinished, and that feels about right. There are no correct answers, and as with many aspects of the design process it's hard to know when our work is done.

Try different typefaces, look at your work and others' work with a critical eye, talk about what you see and what you like or don't, and keep notes. This is the practice of combining typefaces, a part of design that is endlessly rewarding and entertaining. I hope it's a bit more approachable now.

Happy typesetting!