# **Letterforms in Typography & in Graphic Design**

## **Letterforms in Typography**

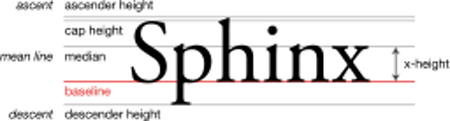
Every place you see printed text, such as in books, street signs, or on your phone, you see letterforms. A **letterform** is the shape that a given letter takes. For graphic designers, the selection of a collection of letterforms (typically comprising an alphabet, its numbers, and a variety of symbols) is part of choosing [**typography**](https://study.com/learn/lesson/typography-history-terminology-examples.html). This single collection is called a **typeface**, and it will have a name that indicates the creator, the style, or some other identifying attribute of that particular collection. Although the creation of letterforms predates the printing press and was the focus of the creation of calligraphic "hands" or types of writing, typography refers to standardized letterforms used in printed or digital materials.

Typography sets the mood of an entire piece of work. Serif typefaces look more formal. Simple typefaces let the content take center stage. Typefaces can even carry meaning; a Blackletter typeface may evoke Old English history, while a sans serif typeface may look contemporary and fresh. There are so many typefaces available today that organizations such as the **Letterform Archive** in San Francisco seek to collect and curate examples of typefaces and letterforms and how they have been used.

## **Anatomy of a Letter**

Each letter in a typeface has its own component parts. This **typography anatomy** or **anatomy of a letter** dictates how each letter will be formed to create a coherent typeface. For example, the stem, or straight vertical stroke, will be handled consistently throughout the typeface, as will the bowl, or curved part of the letter. Type designers also decide how the strokes in each letter will meet, and they make adjustments to make the typeface easily readable and pleasant to the eye. For example, allowing the bowl and the stem of the lowercase "h" to meet with the thickness of each stroke unaltered may make the letter look too heavy. Therefore, many type designers will make this joining spot thinner so the eye reads the letter as more balanced.

### **Lines used in Typesetting**



***The lines and terms used in typography***

Several different **typography lines** are used in [typesetting](https://study.com/learn/lesson/typesetting-overview-characteristics.html); these lines and the parts of the letterform they describe make identification of the typeface easier for designers:

* Baseline: the line on which the bottom of the letters, exclusive of descenders, sits
* Median: the line to which tops of the letters, exclusive of ascenders, reach
* x-height: the distance between the baseline and the median, so-called because it is the height of a lower case x
* Cap height: the height of a capital letter
* Ascender: part of a letter that reaches above the median
* Descender: part of a letter that reaches below the baseline

### **Typography Letter Parts**

There are a number of **typography letter parts** that describe the individual letters. Some of these parts are:

* Stems: the straight body of a letter that typically extends from the baseline to the median or cap height of the typography lines
* Strokes: a part of the letter that is continuous, whether it is straight or ending in a curve
* Serifs: horizontal lines or blocks that sit at the ends of letterforms
* Terminals: ends of letterforms in sans serif typefaces
* Bowls: rounded parts of the body of the letterform, as distinct from strokes

## **Styles of Typefaces**

There are many different styles or families of typefaces. Designers typically begin their work by deciding which style or styles they intend to work with before moving to a selection of a specific typeface.

### **Old Style**

Old Style typefaces are modeled on the carvings on stone monuments in ancient Rome. One such typeface is Trajan, which is modeled on the carvings on Trajan's Arch. Old Style typefaces are characterized by serifs on the letterforms and an open structure that makes the typefaces easy to read in traditional print-on-paper applications. Perhaps the best-known Old-Style typeface is Caslon.

### **Transitional**

For a short period in the late 18th century, a style of a typeface called Transitional was in vogue. Taking advantage of printing technology that allowed for more delicate lines, Transitional typefaces are a bridge between Old Style and Modern. Transitional typefaces evoke the flow of calligraphy, but they are created using strict mathematical rules and grids to design the letterforms. One of the best-known Transitional typefaces is Romain du Roi.

### **Modern**

As printing technology became ever more sophisticated and allowed for still more delicate lines, Modern typefaces emerged in the late 18th and 19th century. Modern typefaces typically have a high degree of contrast between thick and thin strokes, and they have very thin serifs. A well-known Modern typeface common to many word processing programs is Century Schoolbook.

### **San Serif**

Sans serif typefaces, as the name implies, do not have serifs. They were also derived from Roman carvings, but from those that were less formal than the ones that made use of serifs, which were considered formal. San serif typefaces became very popular as part of the [Bauhaus movement](https://study.com/learn/lesson/bauhaus-movement-history-timeline.html) of the early and mid-20th century. The most well-known sans serif typeface is Helvetica.

### **Blackletter/Gothic**

Gothic, or Blackletter, typefaces are based on medieval calligraphy. Big, complex, and ornate, these typefaces typically evoke Old English or German history and are typically used to convey this sense of history or formality.

As typography moves into the digital age, several additional families have emerged. Designers may talk about script, brush, broadside, and slab serif families, in addition to specialty or decorative font families. Many of these options are readily available to the public through word processing or basic design programs.