

"What Font Should I Use?": Five Principles for Choosing and Using Typefaces

By [Dan Mayer](#)

December 14th, 2010

[Fonts, Typography](#)

[131 Comments](#)

For many beginners, the task of picking fonts is a mystifying process. There seem to be endless choices — from normal, conventional-looking fonts to novelty candy cane fonts and bunny fonts — with no way of understanding the options, only never-ending lists of categories and recommendations. Selecting the right typeface is a mixture of firm rules and loose intuition, and takes years of experience to develop a feeling for. Here are **five guidelines for picking and using fonts** that I've developed in the course of using and teaching typography.

Advertisement

1. Dress For The Occasion

Many of my beginning students go about picking a font as though they were searching for new music to listen to: they assess the personality of each face and look for something unique and distinctive that expresses their particular aesthetic taste, perspective and personal history. This approach is problematic, because it places too much importance on individuality.



The most appropriate analogy for picking type. (Photo credit: [Samuuraijohnny](#). Used under Creative Commons license.)

For better or for worse, picking a typeface is more like getting dressed in the morning. Just as with clothing, there's a distinction between typefaces that are expressive and stylish versus those that are useful and appropriate to many situations, and our job is to try to find the right balance for the occasion.

While appropriateness isn't a sexy concept, it's the acid test that should guide our choice of font.

My "favorite" piece of clothing is probably an outlandish pair of 70s flare bellbottoms that I bought at a thrift store, but the reality is that these don't make it out of my closet very often outside of Halloween. Every designer has a few favorite fonts like this — expressive personal favorites that we hold onto and wait for the perfect festive occasion to use. More often, I find myself putting on the same old pair of Levis morning after morning. It's not that I *like* these better than my cherished flares, exactly... I just seem to wind up wearing them most of the time.

Every designer has a few workhorse typefaces that are like comfortable jeans: they go with everything, they seem to adapt to their surroundings and become more relaxed or more formal as the occasion calls for, and they just seem to come out of the closet day after day. Usually, these are faces that have a number of weights (Light, Regular, Bold, etc) and/or cuts (Italic, Condensed, etc). My particular safety blankets are: [Myriad](#), [Gotham](#), [DIN](#), [Akzidenz Grotesk](#) and [Interstate](#) among the sans; [Mercury](#), [Electra](#) and [Perpetua](#) among the serif faces.



A large type family like Helvetica Neue can be used to express a range of voices and emotions. Versatile and comfortable to work with, these faces are like a favorite pair of jeans for designers.

2. Know Your Families: Grouping Fonts



The clothing analogy gives us a good idea of what kind of closet we need to put together. The next challenge is to develop some kind of structure by which we can mentally categorize the different typefaces we run across.

Typefaces can be divided and subdivided into dozens of categories (Scotch Modern, anybody?), but **we only really need to keep track of five groups** to establish a working understanding of the majority of type being used in the present-day landscape.

The following list is not meant as a comprehensive classification of each and every category of type (there are plenty of great sites on the web that already tackle this, such as [Typedia's type classifications](#)) but rather as a manageable shorthand overview of key groups. Let's look at two major groups without serifs (serifs being the little feet at the ends of the letterforms), two with serifs, and one outlier (with big,

boxey feet).

1. GEOMETRIC SANS



I'm actually combining three different groups here (Geometric, Realist and Grotesk), but there is enough in common between these groups that we can think of them as one entity for now. Geometric Sans-Serifs are those faces that are based on **strict geometric forms**. The individual letter forms of a Geometric Sans often have strokes that are all the same width and frequently evidence a kind of "less is more" minimalism in their design.

At their best, Geometric Sans are clear, objective, modern, universal; at their worst, cold, impersonal, boring. A classic Geometric Sans is like a beautifully designed airport: it's impressive, modern and useful, but we have to think twice about whether or not we'd like to live there.

Examples of Geometric/Realist/Grotesk Sans: Helvetica, Univers, Futura, Avant Garde, Akzidenz Grotesk, Franklin Gothic, Gotham.

2. HUMANIST SANS



These are Sans faces that are derived from **handwriting** — as clean and modern as some of them may

look, they still retain something inescapably human at their root. Compare the 't' in the image above to the 't' in 'Geometric' and note how much more detail and idiosyncrasy the Humanist 't' has.

This is the essence of the Humanist Sans: whereas Geometric Sans are typically designed to be as simple as possible, the letter forms of a Humanist font generally have more detail, less consistency, and frequently involve thinner and thicker stroke weights — after all they come from our handwriting, which is something individuated. At their best, Humanist Sans manage to have it both ways: modern yet human, clear yet empathetic. At their worst, they seem wishy-washy and fake, the hand servants of corporate insincerity.

Examples of Humanist Sans: Gill Sans, Frutiger, Myriad, Optima, Verdana.

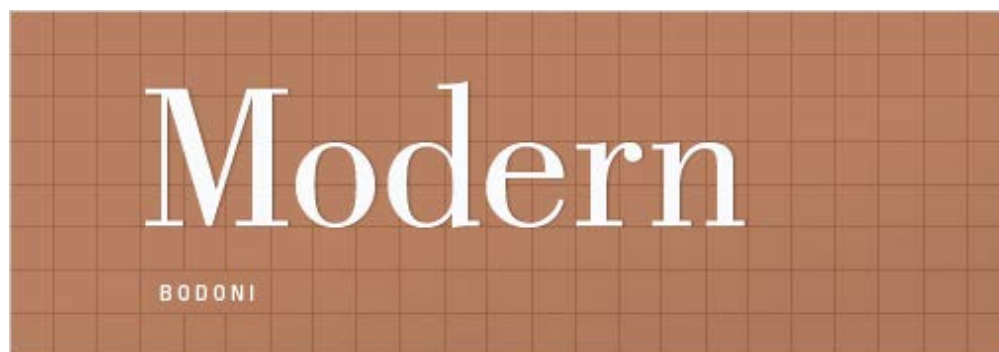
3. OLD STYLE



Also referred to as 'Venetian', these are our **oldest typefaces**, the result of centuries of incremental development of our calligraphic forms. Old Style faces are marked by little contrast between thick and thin (as the technical restrictions of the time didn't allow for it), and the curved letter forms tend to tilt to the left (just as calligraphy tilts). Old Style faces at their best are classic, traditional, readable and at their worst are... well, classic and traditional.

Examples of Old Style: Jenson, Bembo, Palatino, and — especially — Garamond, which was considered so perfect at the time of its creation that no one really tried much to improve on it for a century and a half.

4. TRANSITIONAL AND MODERN



An outgrowth of Enlightenment thinking, Transitional (mid 18th Century) and Modern (late 18th century, not to be confused with mid 20th century modernism) typefaces emerged as type designers experimented with making their letterforms **more geometric, sharp and virtuosic** than the unassuming faces of the Old Style period. Transitional faces marked a modest advancement in this direction — although Baskerville, a quintessential Transitional typeface, appeared so sharp to onlookers that people believed it could hurt one's vision to look at it.

In carving Modernist punches, type designers indulged in a kind of virtuosic demonstration of contrasting thick and thin strokes — much of the development was spurred by a competition between two rival designers who cut similar faces, Bodoni and Didot. At their best, transitional and modern faces seem strong, stylish, dynamic. At their worst, they seem neither here nor there — too conspicuous and baroque to be classic, too stodgy to be truly modern.

Examples of transitional typefaces: Times New Roman, Baskerville.

Examples of Modern serifs: Bodoni, Didot.

5. SLAB SERIFS



Also known as ‘Egyptian’ (don’t ask), the Slab Serif is a wild card that has come strongly back into vogue in recent years. Slab Serifs usually have strokes like those of sans faces (that is, simple forms with relatively little contrast between thick and thin) but with solid, rectangular shoes stuck on the end. Slab Serifs are an outlier in the sense that they convey **very specific — and yet often quite contradictory — associations**: sometimes the thinker, sometimes the tough guy; sometimes the bully, sometimes the nerd; sometimes the urban sophisticate, sometimes the cowboy.

They can convey a sense of authority, in the case of heavy versions like Rockwell, but they can also be quite friendly, as in the recent favorite Archer. Many slab serifs seem to express an urban character (such as Rockwell, Courier and Lubalin), but when applied in a different context (especially Clarendon) they strongly recall the American Frontier and the kind of rural, vernacular signage that appears in photos from this period. Slab Serifs are hard to generalize about as a group, but their distinctive blocky serifs function something like a pair of horn-rimmed glasses: they add a distinctive wrinkle to anything, but can easily become overly conspicuous in the wrong surroundings.

Examples of Slab Serifs: Clarendon, Rockwell, Courier, Lubalin Graph, Archer.

3. Don’t Be a Wimp: The Principle of Decisive Contrast

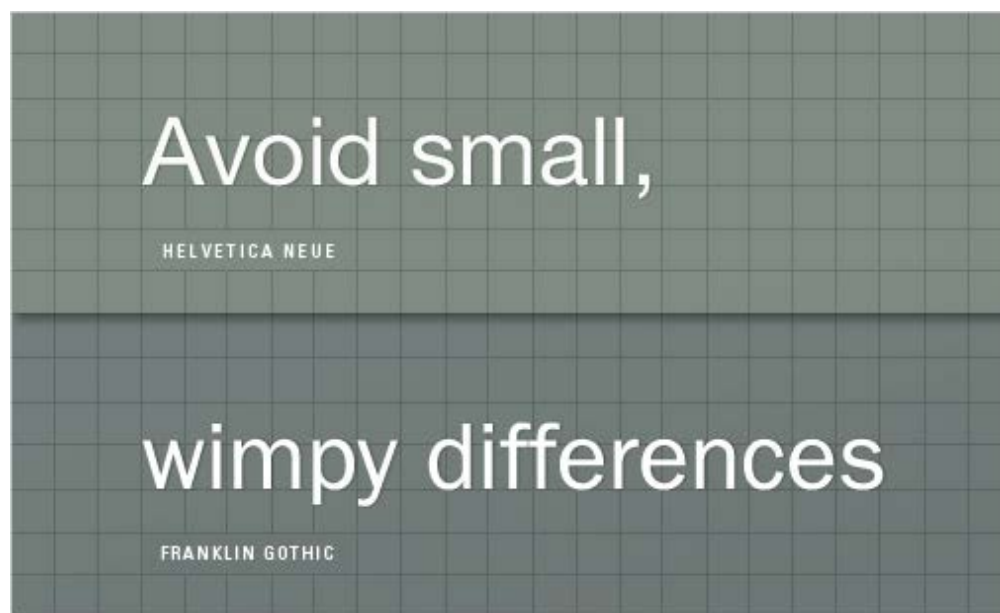
So, now that we know our families and some classic examples of each, we need to decide how to mix and match and — most importantly — whether to mix and match at all. Most of the time, one typeface will do, especially if it’s one of our workhorses with many different weights that work together. If we reach a point where we want to add a second face to the mix, it’s always good to observe this simple rule: **keep it exactly the same, or change it a lot** — avoid wimpy, incremental variations.

This is a general principle of design, and its official name is *correspondence and contrast*. The best way to view this rule in action is to take all the random coins you collected in your last trip through Europe and dump them out on a table together. If you put two identical coins next to each other, they look

good together because they match (*correspondence*). On the other hand, if we put a dime next to one of those big copper coins we picked up somewhere in Central Europe, this also looks interesting because of the *contrast* between the two — they look sufficiently different.

What doesn't work so well is when put our dime next to a coin from another country that's almost the same size and color but slightly different. This creates an uneasy visual relationship because it poses a question, even if we barely register it in on a conscious level — our mind asks the question of whether these two are the same or not, and that process of asking and wondering distracts us from simply viewing.

When we combine multiple typefaces on a design, we want them to coexist comfortably — we don't want to distract the viewer with the question, *are these the same or not?* We can start by avoiding two different faces from within one of the five categories that we listed above all together — two geometric sans, say Franklin and Helvetica. While not exactly alike, these two are also not sufficiently different and therefore put our layout in that dreaded neither-here-nor-there place.

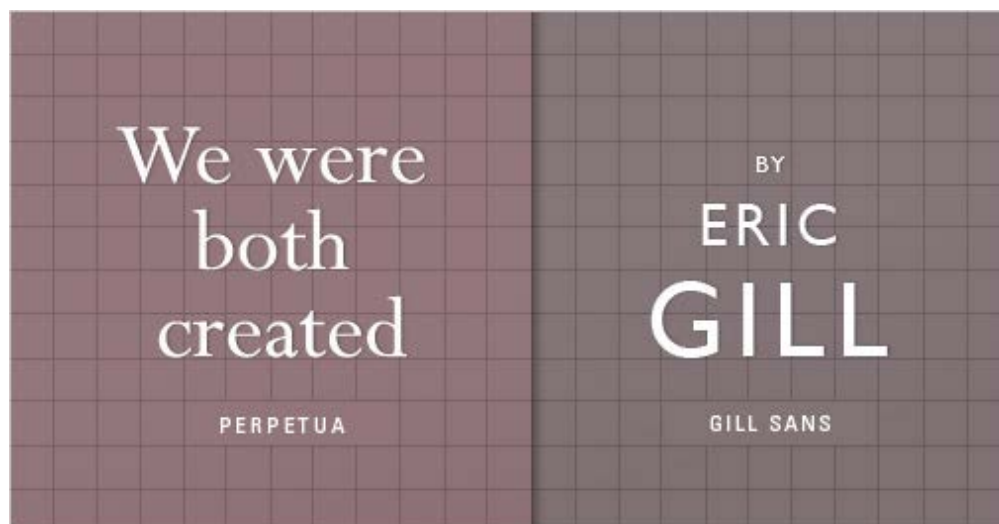


If we are going to throw another font into the pot along with Helvetica, much better if we use something like Bembo, a classic Old Style face. Centuries apart in age and light years apart in terms of inspiration, Helvetica and Bembo have enough contrast to comfortably share a page:



Unfortunately, it's not as simple as just picking fonts that are very, very different — placing our candy cane font next to, say, Garamond or Caslon does not guarantee us typographic harmony. Often, as in the above example of Helvetica and Bembo, there's no real explanation for why two faces complement each other — they just do.

But if we want some principle to guide our selection, it should be this: often, two typefaces work well together if they have one thing in common but are otherwise greatly different. This shared common aspect can be visual (similar x-height or stroke weight) or it can be chronological. Typefaces from the same period of time have a greater likelihood of working well together... and if they are by the same designer, all the better.

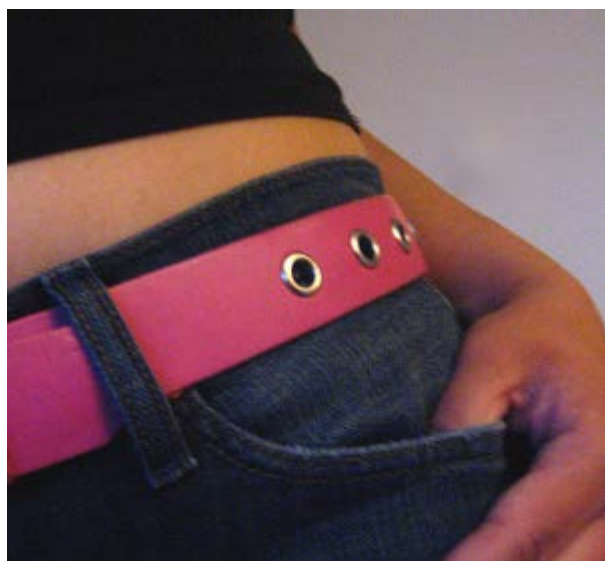


4. A Little Can Go a Long Way

'Enough with all these conventional-looking fonts and rules!' you say. 'I need something for my rave flyer! And my Thai restaurant menu! And my Christmas cards!' What you're pointing out here is that all the faces I've discussed so far are 'body typefaces', meaning you could conceivably set a whole menu or newspaper with any of them; in the clothing analogy presented in part one, these are our everyday Levis. What of our Halloween flares?

Periodically, there's a need for a font that oozes with personality, whether that personality is warehouse party, Pad Thai or Santa Claus. And this need brings us into the vast wilderness of Display typefaces, which includes everything from Comic Sans to our candy-cane and bunny fonts. 'Display' is just another way of saying '**do not exceed recommended dosage**': applied sparingly to headlines, a display font can add a well-needed dash of flavor to a design, but it can quickly wear out its welcome if used too widely.

Time for another clothing analogy:



(Photo credit: [Betsssssy](#). Used under Creative Commons license.)

Betsey's outfit works because the pink belts acts as an accent and is offset by the down-to-earthiness of blue jeans. But if we get carried away and slather Betsey entirely in pink, she might wind up looking something like this:

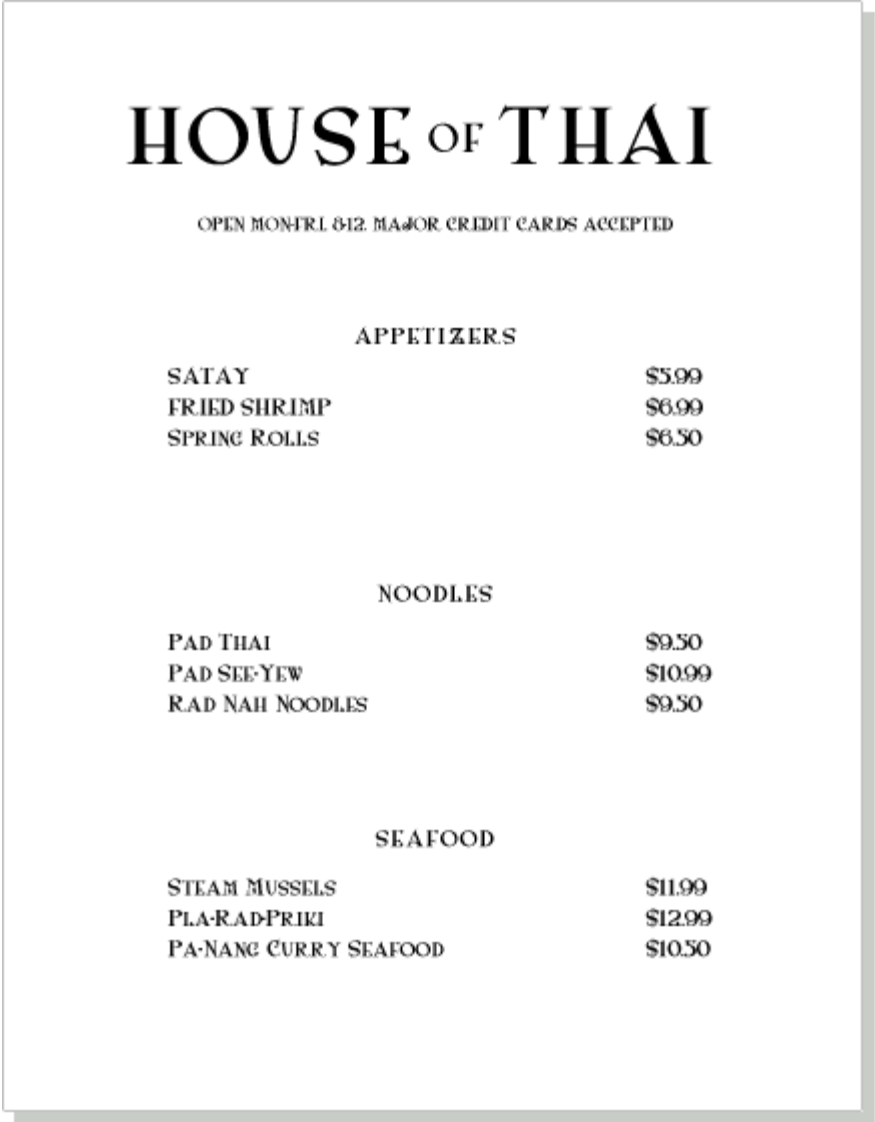


(Photo credit: [Phillip Leroyer](#)). Used under Creative Commons license.)

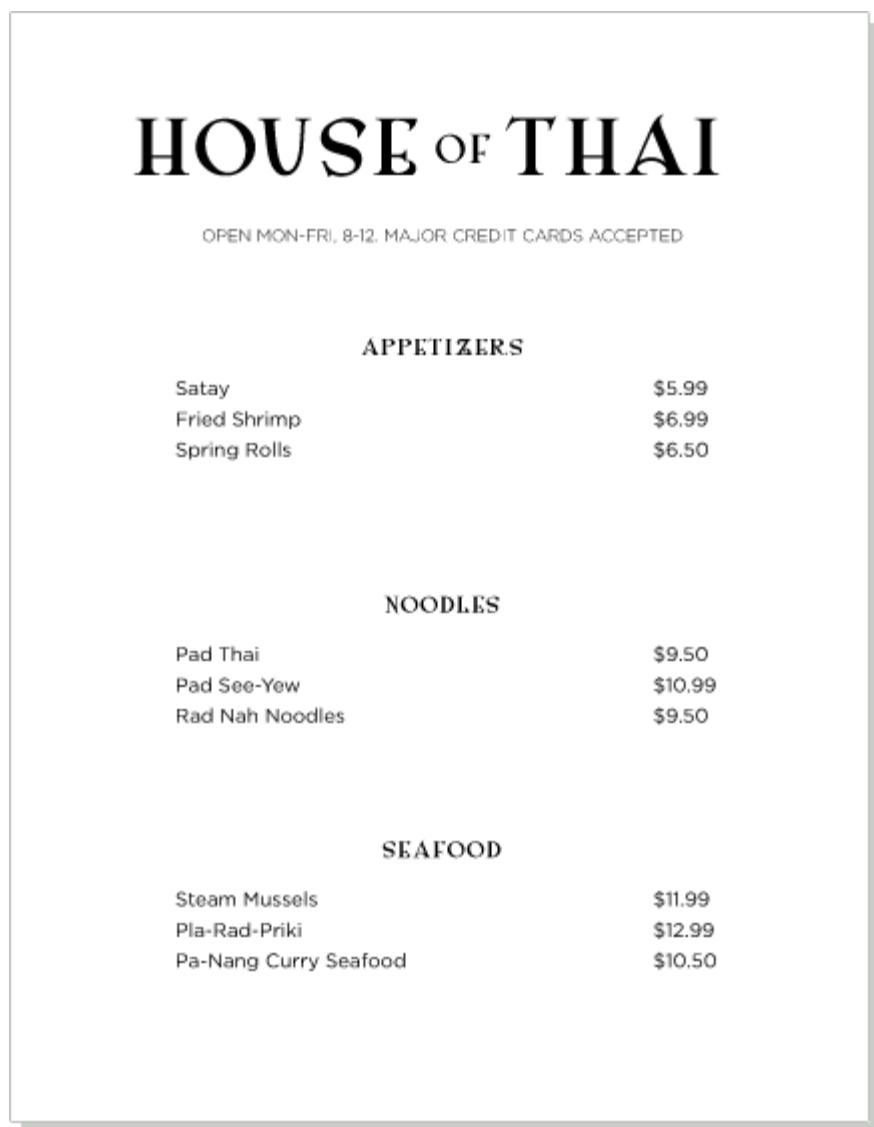
Let's call this the Pink Belt Principle of Type: display faces with lots of personality are best used in small doses. If we apply our cool display type to every bit of text in our design, the aesthetic appeal of the type is quickly spent and — worse yet — our design becomes very hard to read. Let's say we're designing a menu for our favorite corner Thai place. Our client might want us to use a 'typically' Asian display face, like Sho:

HOUSE OF THAI

So far, so good. But look what happens when we apply our prized font choice to the entire menu:



Enough already. Let's try replacing some of the rank-and-file text copy with something more neutral:



HOUSE OF THAI	
OPEN MON-FRI, 8-12. MAJOR CREDIT CARDS ACCEPTED	
APPETIZERS	
Satay	\$5.99
Fried Shrimp	\$6.99
Spring Rolls	\$6.50
NOODLES	
Pad Thai	\$9.50
Pad See-Yew	\$10.99
Rad Nah Noodles	\$9.50
SEAFOOD	
Steam Mussels	\$11.99
Pla-Rad-Priki	\$12.99
Pa-Nang Curry Seafood	\$10.50

That's better. Now that we've reined in the usage of our star typeface, we've allowed it to shine again.

5. Rule Number Five Is 'There Are No Rules'

Really. Look hard enough and you will find a dazzling-looking menu set entirely in a hard-to-read display font. Or of two different Geometric Sans faces living happily together on a page (in fact, just this week I wound up trying this on a project and was surprised to find that it hit the spot). **There are only conventions, no ironclad rules** about how to use type, just as there are no rules about how we should dress in the morning. It's worth trying everything just to see what happens — even wearing your Halloween flares to your court date.

In Conclusion

Hopefully, these five principles will have given you some guidelines for how to select, apply and mix type — and, indeed, whether to mix it at all. In the end, picking typefaces requires a combination of understanding and intuition, and — as with any skill — demands practice. With all the different fonts we have access to nowadays, it's easy to forget that there's nothing like a classic typeface used well by somebody who knows how to use it.

Some of the best type advice I ever received came early on from my first typography teacher: **pick one typeface you like** and use it over and over for months to the exclusion of all others. While this kind of exercise can feel constraining at times, it can also serve as a useful reminder that the quantity of available choices in the internet age is no substitute for quality.

Other Resources

You may be interested in the following articles and related resources:

- [Typedia Type Classifications](#)
A more extensive list of different categories and sub-categories of typefaces than the simplified version presented in this article.
- [So You Need A Typeface?](#)
Useful — and humorous — flowchart for selecting type, brought to you by Julian Hansen via Inspiration Lab.
- [The Elements of Typographic Style by Robert Bringhurst](#)
Link to the Amazon.com order page for this 1992 classic.
- [What Type Are You?](#)
Pentagram's patented personality test.
- [Best Practices of Combining Typefaces](#)
This article takes a close look at some of the best practices for combining typefaces — as well as some blunders to avoid.

(ik) (vf)

FontsTypography

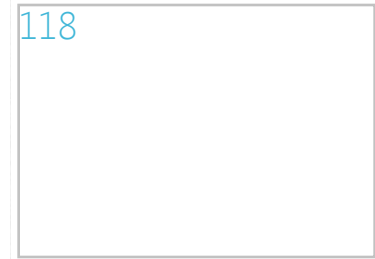
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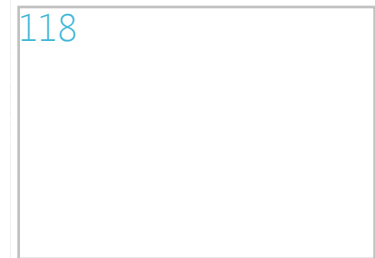
Dan Mayer

Dan Mayer's interest in graphic design began when he was five years old and visited a printing press on a 1979 episode of *Sesame Street*. Originally from the US, he recently spent five years in Prague teaching classes in design theory and history at Prague College and providing art direction for Dept. of Design. Dan currently freelances and splits his time between Prague and Berlin. His work and more examples of his writing can be found at www.danmayer.com.

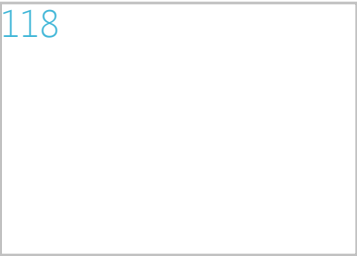
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1.

1



John Mindiola III

[December 14, 2010 7:11 am](#)

This is a nice introduction to typography. I'll share this with my students. Rule #5 is gold.

16

2.

2



Alyssa

[December 14, 2010 7:15 am](#)

Great refresh on typography!

4

3.

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Jim Krill

[December 14, 2010 7:20 am](#)

I believe you mean "litmus test" not "acid test". Good article, though. I hate choosing fonts, but these 5 principles are very helpful.

-23

4.

4



Rizqi Djamaluddin

[December 14, 2010 7:24 am](#)

An extra tip I learned to love (and mentioned in passing in the article, but I think it needs more attention): If two fonts will be in close proximity, try to keep the x-height (the height of a, say, lowercase 'm') the same. I found that this can highly influence the readability of the fonts. It can be the difference between an enjoyable read, and eyes uncomfortably re-adjusting every time they come across a page header.

Also, contrast plays a very big role as well.

Good article!

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Basil

[December 14, 2010 7:24 am](#)

I love typography! It's my favorite part of design. Great article indeed.

5

6.

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Oggy

[December 14, 2010 7:56 am](#)

Brilliant article. Very well written with some solid, practical advice. It came just at the write time for me as I was just designing a website with some very close matches – Minion Pro and Chaparral Pro together. I realised that Minion wasn't really required and Chaparral was adequate on it's own, with it's various weights and styles. Looks a lot better now.

One interesting thing I've found is that people often suggest serif for body and sans-serif for headings when you're mixing fonts. But I often prefer it the other way around. Is there a reason people keep suggesting this? Personally I like to have a nice serif as a header, showing off it's character and style, with a clear, readable sans-serif in the body. Or is that just wrong? Like eating the sweet before the savory?

Again, great article.

3

7



Douglas Bonneville

[December 14, 2010 8:34 am](#)

Oggy: the sans header / serif body pair is taken from it's basic effectiveness in newspapers. It's easy to read big headlines from across the street, so that you go buy the newspaper! We live in a rapidly changing environment, and perhaps the necessity for big headlines has lessened somewhat, but it's basic effectiveness still remains. That said, a serif body copy is a better choice if there is a lot of text to read, but "a lot" is a subjective term. "It all depends" as they say :)

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8



Chris

[December 14, 2010 9:22 am](#)

I've never understood why someone would put a serif as copy on a webpage either.

Lately I've gotten into Slab Serifs as headings and Humanist copy and it works well, IMO.

0

9



Dan Mayer

[December 14, 2010 8:57 am](#)

Good answer from Douglas Bonneville (whose article on combining typefaces everyone should read:

<http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/11/04/best-practices-of-combining-typefaces/>)

I would also point to the historical precedent for the sans header / serif text match. Sans faces existed in the 19th century, but largely just as a novelty item for headlines and other display contexts– nobody thought of setting an entire text in sans until the early 20th century. And even as widely-used as sans faces were used in the mid- and late- 20th century, it wasn't until the coming of the internet that we really got used to them as a body text option.

2

10



Seth M.

[December 14, 2010 11:41 am](#)

It seems I get wallpapers that make me smile when I click on your link, Dan. Here is a another, just for the lazy folk like me to quickly click:

<http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/11/04/best-practices-of-combining-typefaces/>

Both of these articles are excellent and really help a want-to-be designer like myself. Thanks.

0

11



Dan Mayer

[December 14, 2010 12:23 pm](#)

Thanks, Seth– I borked the link first time around.

2

12



Oggy

[December 15, 2010 1:03 am](#)

Thanks for the answers guys! That was one of the articles I read that suggested it and was one of the original reasons I had the question. I suppose serif are considered more 'readable'. Didn't know that they weren't using sans-serif in body for that long though!

Although I do agree with Chris below too. I'm quite partial to a good slab (Sentinel, for example).

0

13



sharon

[January 8, 2011 6:12 am](#)

for long bodies of text serif is easier and faster to read on the eyes.

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14



Quakeulf :3

[December 14, 2010 9:19 am](#)

Do more stuff on typography! Please please please! I really like these articles. :3

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Jessica

[December 14, 2010 9:23 am](#)

I LOVE your analogy! Reading about your favorite piece of clothing and the analogy using coins made me laugh (in a good way). :) I wish I had you as my typography teacher when I was in college!

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16



Deborah

[December 14, 2010 9:36 am](#)

This article is very helpful for a basics, student-teacher approach, but it stops short of meaningfully discussing

how fonts should create an appropriate look at the higher level. In the larger picture, it's important to examine the competitors of any client you are picking a font (and colors, and graphics) for, identify what the current overall "look and feel" is for the industry or type of business, and make sure that you are creating a look that has uniqueness and freshness within the visual language that is already established. If you get too far off base, with fonts or any other visual element – you've lost your client's audience, especially online. The larger and more visible the industry, the more important accuracy in this area is. Alternatively, using an "unexpected" font where the rest of the visual language is right on target, can be very powerful. I'd like to see a higher level exploration of font usage (and other topics) that are beyond the basics – I love Smashing, but am discouraged right now with articles that are uniformly covering the lowest-level basics that there are in font usage, photography, and similar topics. Maybe it's because I haven't been a regular reader long, but... When do we deep dive?

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17



Aaron Martone

[December 14, 2010 11:43 am](#)

I'm a sucker for Myriad Pro. She's such a timeless typeface IMO. Rockwell is a great-looking slab serif and as far as serifs go, I've always like Georgia's simplicity.

There's something very attractive about fonts and how they present information to us. I have a wall of different typographical layouts for inspiration. Good typography not only makes consumption of data easier, but it makes the presentation more professional.

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11.

18



Jordan

[December 14, 2010 3:42 pm](#)

Thanks, Dan. I'll be applying these guidelines to my new website, mediummessage.com. I really like number three. It encourages me to go all out or keep it simple.

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12.

19



Sander Wehkamp

[December 14, 2010 7:13 am](#)

I really like the typefaces you've displayed here. Especially the grouping fonts gave me some insights about what to use in a project i'am working on at the moment.

Thank you.

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13.

20



Sam

[December 14, 2010 7:37 am](#)

Great Article .. and absolutely correct rule #5..

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21



Chris

[December 16, 2010 1:58 am](#)

Every article about Typographie should start with this rule^^

-11

14.

22



Michael

[December 14, 2010 7:40 am](#)

You forgot the number one rule: Never use Comic Sans.

43

23



Erin

[December 28, 2010 6:40 am](#)

...or Brush Script

-1

15.

24



IdentityMe

[December 14, 2010 8:08 am](#)

Amazing article. Will be use in my projects.

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16.

25



Hugh Shannon Myers

[December 14, 2010 8:42 am](#)

Great article, but why is it that no one ever mentions pi fonts dingbats and other traditional printer's tools. Since I deal with typeset chess diagrams I'd really like to see at least some recognition that there is a bit more to the typographic universe than what this and similar articles suggest. Please don't miss-understand, given the lack of typo information for most of the history of the web and the insane notion (thank you Sir Lee!) that user's rule when it comes to page design any information about one of the loves of my life is appreciated.

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17.

26



David Platt

[December 14, 2010 9:36 am](#)

I'd like to see a more advanced version of this post (this is truly for beginners)

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27



Dan Mayer

[December 14, 2010 12:51 pm](#)

@Deborah and David Platt: I understand where you're coming from in terms of deeming this article too beginner-ish. The impetus of this article came out of my observation that most resources for typography (especially those available online) focus only very basic distinctions ('sans vs. serif'), or else have so much technical and taxonomical detail ('30 different classifications of type!') that they do little to humanize the subject and make it accessible to beginners. While I hope that this article fills a gap for less experienced designers, I

recognize that it's not really appropriate for more sophisticated folks.

My feeling is that it would be a good thing if more people wrote about type from a personal and subjective viewpoint and brought their own priorities to the table. With that in mind, Deborah: you should absolutely propose an article for Smashing Mag with your ideas about type. It would make a good read!

8

18.

28



Matt

[December 14, 2010 9:42 am](#)

Thanks for the post. I wish there were a way that all my fonts were collected in these groups when I go to choose one, instead of simply alphabetically.

1

29



Markus

[December 14, 2010 8:50 pm](#)

That's actually a great idea! Anyone know of any way to do this?

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30



Chris

[December 22, 2010 3:29 am](#)

If you use something like universal type server/client from extensis you can categorize your type faces and

search them by style. Also you can create groups of references to the fonts without duplicating the files, allowing you to create a bunch of stored pairings. I do this at work when I'm bored. :)

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19.

31



Chris Mower

[December 14, 2010 9:43 am](#)

Great post. I've been doing some studying on typography to figure it out better and your analogy was quite effective. Thanks.

0

20.

32



David Kadavy

[December 14, 2010 9:54 am](#)

GAH! I had a very similar article written in draft form, but this is really excellent. I like the consolidation of type families that really don't differ all that much.

1

21.

33



Lavi Perchik

[December 14, 2010 10:28 am](#)

Thank you for this post.

I loved "So You Need a Typeface" by Julian Hansen and I created an interactive version to it:

<http://laviwebsites.com/font/so-you-need-a-typeface.php>

0

22.

34



Ben Joven

[December 14, 2010 10:52 am](#)

Helvetica rules!

But some serifs are best for reading eg., NYTimes.com

0

35



Dan Mayer

[December 14, 2010 9:19 pm](#)

It's funny: I actually don't use Helvetica very much— it just kept popping up in this article as a suitable face to use for visual examples. The idea of spelling 'I love you' and 'I hate you' in different Helvetica weights is taken from Maximo Vignelli, who mentions the idea in passing in the 2003 Helvetica documentary.

2

23.

36



drane53

[December 14, 2010 1:57 pm](#)

I went on your website and all your images are broken...

-1

24.

37



McWeb

[December 14, 2010 2:07 pm](#)

Some say Bembo, Palatino, and Garamond are French Renaissance-Antiqua and for example Jenson, Centaur, Cambria are Venetian Renaissance Antiqua. But as you said. There are a lot of different categories and opinions ;)

nice article

-1

25.

38



Charlie Melbye

[December 14, 2010 2:41 pm](#)

Which font are you using for the menu items in the revised restaurant menu?

0

39



Dan Mayer

[December 14, 2010 9:27 pm](#)

That's Gotham

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26.

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Oxana Kostromina

[December 14, 2010 2:58 pm](#)

Thanks a lot! Great post.

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greg urbano

[December 14, 2010 3:11 pm](#)

any ideas from coomenter for help or feedback from my font selection at thecitruslens ?

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Don Wilson

[December 14, 2010 3:55 pm](#)

Outstanding article. I have been trying to get a better idea on how to select fonts. The descriptions of different categories of fonts are awesome. The suggestions on how to find fonts that go well together are great.

Thanks!

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29.

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KJ

[December 14, 2010 4:16 pm](#)

Thank you. Most typography articles I've come across either barely brush on the differences between the families and just show as many fonts as possible, or get really in-depth with the differences between them. Yours is the first I've read that explains the "why" of each family, and how best to use them. I'll definitely be bookmarking this article for future reference.

I'd love to see a follow-up article about using these rules with @font-face and web safe fonts, especially on choosing fonts to pair with each other.

Thanks!

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Dan Mayer

[December 15, 2010 2:51 pm](#)

Thanks. The first paragraph of your comment pretty much exactly hits on my rationale for writing this article, so I'm glad to see that it hit the spot.

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media designer

[December 14, 2010 4:57 pm](#)

Type nerds of the world unite! Thanks for this. What a great article!

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Jonathan Búcaro

[December 31, 2010 1:48 pm](#)

hehehe good one d(^.^)z

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31.

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Julie

[December 14, 2010 5:46 pm](#)

This is a great article. I found #3 interesting in regards to using fonts that are created by the same designer. Now if I am having issues with combining different fonts I now know the solution! julielsingaro.com

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32.

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Bea

[December 14, 2010 6:04 pm](#)

I have been looking for an article like this in ages! Thanks for posting it up!

Aside from color, fonts are the next big issues in my projects!

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rajasegar

[December 14, 2010 7:20 pm](#)

Dan, this is really great stuff, thanks for sharing...

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Markus

[December 14, 2010 8:47 pm](#)

Fantastic. Thanks for this excellent writeup for the casual font-and-design lovers such as myself. Although I'm pouring thousands of loan dollars into med school, part of me wishes I would have done graphic design. Since that ship has already sailed, it's through the generosity of writers and teachers like you that I can still learn bits and pieces of your amazing art. Good design is, in my mind, medicine for the brain.

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prasaddeole

[December 14, 2010 10:23 pm](#)

pretty helpful article.

thanks for sharing!

regards

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36.

52



Halle

[December 14, 2010 11:17 pm](#)

Thanks for this article!

But there is, in my opinion, a mistake in your Thai-example: is it right, that the dots of the prices are not in one vertical line?

regards,

Halle!

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53



Dan Mayer

[December 15, 2010 2:57 pm](#)

Yeah, good point.

I skimmed a bit on the details of the menu layout, as the images of this article– much to my surprise– wound up taking almost more time than the actual writing.

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37.

54



sealyspeak

[December 15, 2010 1:00 am](#)

Thanks for the heads up!

I think for too long I have been using just the one font in projects (the clients chosen font) so I forgot about mixing it up!

Regards

Steve

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Cyprian

[December 15, 2010 1:05 am](#)

Dude, thanks for this article. Would you recommend any font with personality connected with FLYing for my site: cypriangwozdz.com?

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Michael Pekarek

[December 15, 2010 3:40 am](#)

great post, thank you so much :) !

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pakaworld

[December 15, 2010 4:16 am](#)

thank you for your advice.

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58



Amy Klemer

[December 15, 2010 4:34 am](#)

Thanks. I love being reminded of the basics of typography design again. It gets so jumbled up with all the options, it is easy to forget the basics we learned.

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59



valk

[December 15, 2010 4:47 am](#)

This is a very interesting one. Will gladly read more articles like this, and/or additions to this one :)

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Joel Emberson

[December 15, 2010 8:15 am](#)

very nice insights and well thought out article – thanks!

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61



Martin Silvertant

[December 15, 2010 8:18 am](#)

“Examples of Old Style: Jenson, Bembo, Palatino, and — especially — Garamond”

Why is Garamond especially a good example? Because of its “perfection” according to the people from that time? What about Caslon?

I always get a bit annoyed when I see the classification ‘Old Style’. I know it’s not an incorrect classification, but I think it’s quite bad to put Venetian types like Jenson and Centaur together with Garalde types like Garamond and Caslon. They’re just too different. I guess they’re often put together because the Venetian types reigned for only 60 years (if I remember correctly) and thus, in terms of quantity this classification just isn’t relevant enough. Either way, Venetian types are often called ‘Old Style’, but not the other way around, so you might want to correct your statement. Your description of ‘Old Style’ perfectly fits Venetian type, which is indeed the first Roman type (Jenson is one of the oldest—if not THE oldest—Roman type[s]), but NOT the first typeface; a few blackletter typefaces were made before that. The Garalde types are not directly based on calligraphy, but rather on Venetian types.

Other than that it’s a nice article. Nothing new, but still helpful for those not as experienced with typefaces.

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Dan Mayer

[December 15, 2010 2:44 pm](#)

Not to sidestep your point, but I think each of the type groupings I've provided could be rightly called over-simplifications, in the sense that they overlook sub-classifications like the Venetian vs. Garamond distinction that you point out. My implicit argument is that once you expand your taxonomy to include such distinctions, the whole mapping of typefaces becomes so complex that it's not really manageable or useful for the lay person. I recognize that there's a difference between making typography accessible versus dumbing it down, and I can only hope that my article succeeds in the former point without falling prey to the latter.

To get to the specifics of your comment: I characterized Garamond as an 'especially' good example because it was the most acclaimed typeface of the period that I'm loosely calling the 'Old Style period'. It would be like saying "apples are the most popular food within the food group known as 'Fruits and Vegetables'". As you say, there's a certain amount of conflation going on here, but I think it's a reasonably instructive generalization.

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63



Alan Fleming

[December 15, 2010 9:21 am](#)

One of the things that I'd love to see an article on is how geographic location alters these principles – for example, here in the UK Slab Serifs are only very, very rarely used, yet there is a strong American tradition of their use in specific ways. Similar with typeface choice in general – I can generally look at a piece of text-based design (admittedly on paper here is easiest) and tell whether the designer was from the UK or US, at a glance.

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64



Dan Mayer

[December 15, 2010 2:48 pm](#)

This is a really great idea for an article. I have a friend who does a excellent lecture on tendencies in American vs. Dutch design (these being two countries he has lived and worked in)... but it's generally hard to find a capable author who has sufficient experience and critical perspective to write on design principles in various locations.

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J Daly

[December 15, 2010 10:36 am](#)

Love the article, and the Pentagram test linked is great fun: i'm New Alphabet, what are you?

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Songy

[December 15, 2010 2:00 pm](#)

Very interesting article man.

Thanks :)

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67



Julien

[December 15, 2010 5:22 pm](#)

Weird !!! Because I learned and worked typo since a long time ago, I both think that explaining your way of working types is as unuseful, but also that it may interest complete beginners... So I'm splitted between my happiness for newbies, and my despite for graphic designers, who are laughing at your post.

thanks anyway for giving so much of your time about basics.

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andrew h

[December 15, 2010 6:02 pm](#)

Knowledge of typographic principles and history is infinitely more important than typographic rules.

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Dante Johnson

[December 15, 2010 6:35 pm](#)

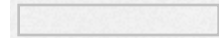
Thanks so much for this. This is brilliant, useful and much needed information. Especially for new design students. I work in the library at a school part time and have passed this on to the dean of design. Kudos and one more reason I love Smashing Magazine.

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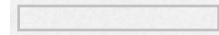
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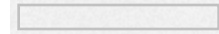
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