How-To Geek

What Is a Web Font?

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Did you know that your web browser is automatically downloading and using fonts that aren't installed on your system? Web fonts help the pages you browse every day look better. Here's what they are and how they work.

Desktop Fonts vs. Web Fonts

We all use fonts every day. Some of them come with your operating system, some come from applications like the Adobe Creative Suite or Microsoft Office, and some are ones that you download or purchase and install yourself. When they're installed, you can use these fonts in word processors, image editing software, and more. These are desktop fonts, and they're stored locally.

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Another type of font has become more important as our computing experience has moved online. These are Web Fonts—typography stored on the cloud (and then cached in your browser) and used to generate the text that appears on websites.

A Brief History of Web Fonts

In the early days of the internet, typography on web pages was limited to what fonts were installed on your system. If a font wasn't installed, the web page would load a standard "fallback" font that was more likely to be available. Because of this, web designers often chose default system fonts for their sites.

Among these were Microsoft's Core Fonts for Web, a set of typefaces made freely available for web design. This pack included widely used system fonts like Times New Roman, Arial, Comic Sans, and Trebuchet. Alternatively, designers could use font families such as Serif, Sans-Serif, and Monospace to specify the general style of a font even if a specific one wasn't available.

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This changed in 2010 when Google launched Google Fonts, a vast open-source repository for free fonts that can be used anywhere on the web. Since then, other competitors, like Adobe's Typekit and web-hosted font plugins, have emerged. Millions of websites from around the world run on web fonts, including Google's productivity suite.
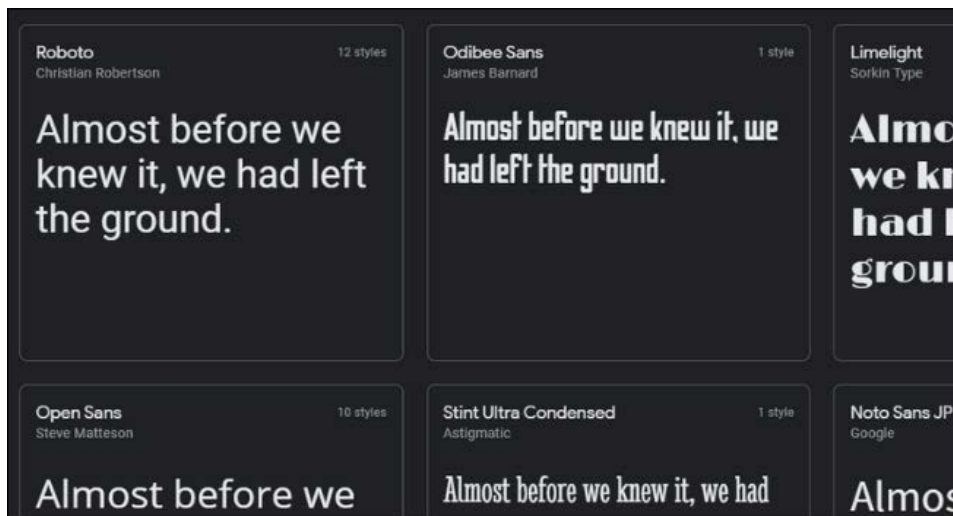
How Web Fonts Work

The biggest Web Font provider, Google Fonts, is an expansive web library of over a thousand fonts. You can use them on your website by pulling them via CSS, and mobile developers can access these fonts when creating Android apps.

When a web page uses Google Fonts, it pulls a font from Google's database and then displays the text in that font to you in your browser. These fonts are hosted on Google's server and are loaded nearly instantaneously. Other cloud font services work much the same way.

Another alternative is using self-hosted, embedded fonts on the web instead. This is done through the [Web Open Font Format](#) (WOFF)—a compressed font file developed by Mozilla that's compatible with most modern web browsers. WOFF is useful if you want to embed a custom font that isn't available on a web font service.

Getting Web Fonts

The Google Fonts repository and all the fonts under it are entirely free to use and accessible to everyone. It only uses fonts under an open license, and many of these fonts have become staples of web design, like Roboto, Lato, and Montserrat. [Google hosts a website](#) that lists all of its available fonts and allows you to try them out and compare them with each other. Google also offers a database of free vector icons.

Since these fonts are freely available, you can download the original font files [for use on your desktop](#) as well. Many websites host Google Fonts' repositories, including [Google's own Github](#). You can use these fonts in projects, freely share them with others, and download them from other places on the internet for free.

Many website builders and content managers like WordPress and Squarespace come with support for web fonts out of the box. If you're using a custom website, you need to upload the font file to your server and use CSS code to point to the font file that you want to use.

If you'd like to learn more about using web fonts for your website, check out this CSS Web Font Guide from W3Schools.

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Vann Vicente has been a technology writer for four years, with a focus on explainers geared towards average consumers. He also works as a digital marketer for a regional e-commerce website. He's invested in internet culture, social media, and how people interact with the web. **READ FULL BIO »**

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