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Typography rules and terms every designer must know

By [Creative Bloq Staff](#) February 25, 2019 [Graphic Design](#)

The fundamental concepts and terminology of typography – in words you can understand.



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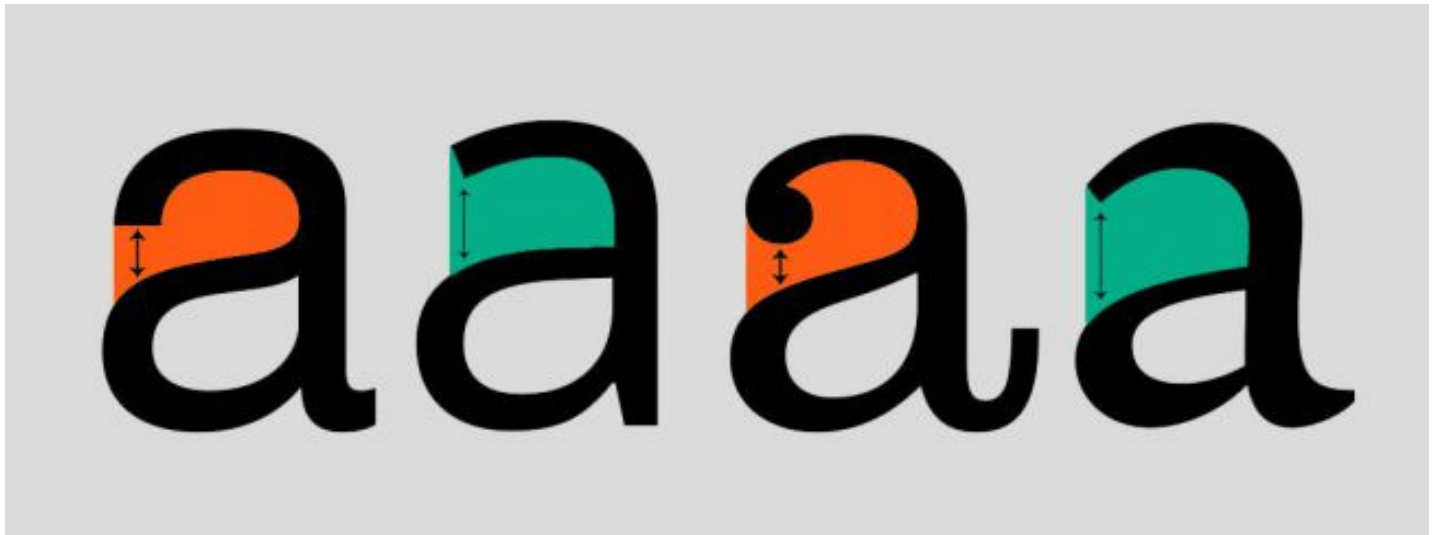
A

Aesc



Pronounced 'ash', this is a ligature of two letters – 'a' and 'e'. The aesc derives from Old English, where it represented a diphthong vowel, and has successfully migrated to other alphabets including Danish and Icelandic.

A
CLOSE X



The constricted opening of a glyph, as seen in the letter 'e'. Varying the size of the aperture has a direct effect on the legibility of a letterform and, ultimately, readability. Apertures can be 'closed' (shown in orange here) or 'open' (green).

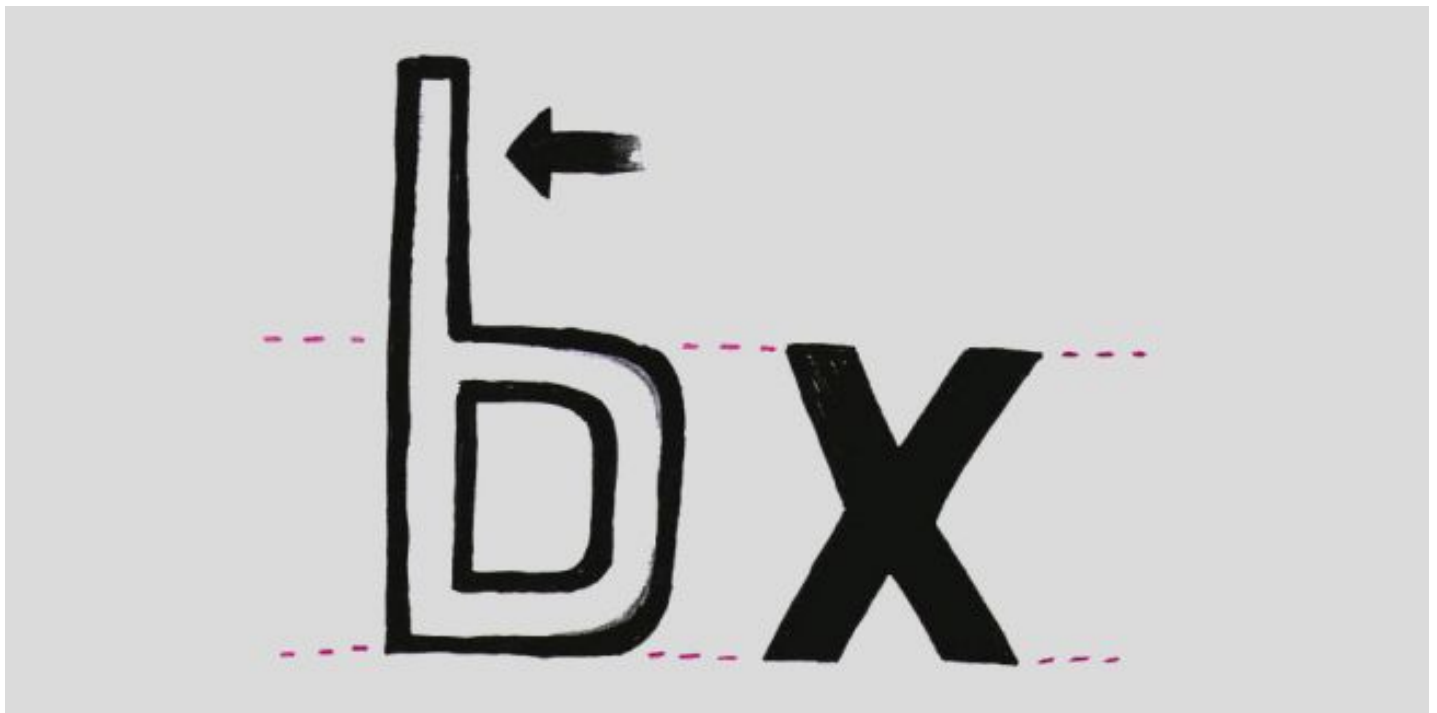
Apex

The point at the top of a character where the left and right strokes meet. The example might be the top point of an uppercase 'A'.

Arm

A horizontal stroke that does not connect to a stroke or stem at one or both ends – such as the top of the capital T.

Ascender



The part of a lowercase letterform that projects above the x-height of the font. Ascenders are important for ease of prolonged reading, though the combination of too much ascender-height and not enough x-height can cause problems.

Baseline

The baseline is where the feet of your capital letters sit. Below this line are descenders and loops.

Bowl



A bowl refers to the shapely, enclosed parts of letterforms. They appear in both lowercase (b) and uppercase (B) characters.

Beak

The curved terminal at the top of letters such as 'a', 'c', 'f' and 'r'. So named because they look a bit like a bird's beak.

Bicameral

Bicameral refers to alphabets that have upper- and lowercase letterforms. For example, Roman and Cyrillic alphabets are bicameral. Hebrew and Arabic do not have lowercase and uppercase letters, so they are referred to as unicameral.

Bracket



A wedge-like shape that joins a serif to the stem of a font in some typefaces. Shown in orange in the image above.

c

Cap height

The height of a capital letter above the baseline.

Copyfitting

The job of adjusting point size and letter spacing in a bid to make text occupy its allotted space in a harmonious fashion.

Counter



TH
C
CLOSE X

Crossbar

The crossbar connects two strokes, as in 'H'. Not to be confused with the cross-stroke, which cuts through the stem of letterforms such as 't'.

Cursive

These are typefaces that imitate handwriting. Take a look at our roundup of the [best free cursive fonts](#) for some examples.

D

Descender

The part of the letterform that falls below the baseline. In lowercase terms, this means 'p', 'y' and 'q', and sometimes applies to uppercase 'J' and 'Q'.

Diacritical



Is it so critical that you might die? No. Diacriticals refer to accents applied to letterforms in languages including French, Czech and German in a bid to enhance the function of the glyph.

Dingbat



Once known as printer's flowers, dingbats are decorative elements. They can vary from simple bullets to delicate fauna and flora, and are often collected into themed sets.

Display font

Any typeface intended to be used in short bursts – rather than for blocks of text – can be defined as a display font. Display fonts are often created just for use at large point sizes, as with headlines and titles.

Drop cap



orem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Donec mauris
 lorem, luctus nec imperdiet a, porttitor eget erat. Quisque suscipit
 congue neque id adipiscing. Vivamus ornare nisl id lacus egestas
 quis varius dolor vehicula. Cras ac lacus in massa sagittis sollicitudin quis in
 lorem. Aliquam et diam ac massa convallis tincidunt. In arcu ante,
 adipiscing nec pharetra ut, cursus vitae lorem. Nam eget mauris eget neque
 sagittis vulputate.

An oversized letter, typically used at the start of a paragraph. It 'drops' into two or more lines of text, but can also climb upwards. The above example is taken from Jessica Hische's [Daily Drop Cap](#) series.

E



A small stroke extending from the upper-right side of the bowl of lowercase g, as shown in the example. It can also appear in a lowercase 'r'.

Ethel

A ligature of the letters 'o' and 'e'.

Em dash



Em is a long horizontal dash (—), equal to the current point size of text. Sometimes referred to as 'Mutton' to distinguish it from the very similar-sounding En. It's the width of a letter 'm'.

E
CLOSE X

'Nut' to its friends, the En (–) is a horizontal dash one half the size of an Em (—). It's the width of a letter 'n'.

Eye

The eye is similar to a counter, but instead refers specifically to the enclosed part of the letter 'e'.

F

Finial

A tapered or curved end, which appears on letters such as 'e' and 'c'.

Fleuron

A subcategory of, or the precursor to, the dingbat. Fleurons are floral marks dreamed up by printers of the past to help decorate text.

<font-face>

The HTML5 tag that brings typography to the internet with typefaces directly embedded in web pages. For more information, take a look at our guide to [web typography](#).

G

Glyph

Any singular mark that makes part of a font, whether a letter, number, punctuation mark or even a dingbat. Glyphs are the building blocks of typography.

Grapheme

Very similar to glyph, but possibly a bit broader. A grapheme is a fundamental unit of language, such as a Chinese pictogram, an exclamation mark or a letterform.

Gutter

The spaces between facing pages of a book or magazine, or the vertical gap between two columns of text.

J

Justified

In a paragraph of justified text, the words are spaced so there is no white space at the end of a line – each begins flush left and finishes flush right. This means the spacing between words will vary depending on how many are in that line.

K

Kerning



The art of adjusting the proximity of adjacent letters to optimise the overall visual appeal and readability. Kerning will depend on the shapes of the letterforms within each pair. In the example above, the top pairs of letters have not been kerned. In the lower pairs, the spacing between the letters has been narrowed to suit the shapes of the characters. For more info, take a look at our [10 top tips for kerning type](#).

L

Leading



Leading describes the vertical space between each line of type. In olden times actual strips of lead were used to separate lines of text

LEADING
CLOSE X

The ease with which one letterform can be distinguished from the next. It feeds into, but is not the same as, readability.

Loop / lobe



The lower part of the letter 'g' is known as its loop or lobe. It can be open (above right) or closed (left). It's also sometimes called the tail – a term that also takes in the lower portion of letter 'y'.

Logotype

The lettered part of any marque or identity. The logotype can be taken separately from its graphic companion.

Ligature



Ligatures pull two forms together to produce a new glyph.

M

Manicule

A pointing hand symbol 🖐️. Also known as the bishop's fist (stop sniggering at the back), or an early emoji.

Monospace



Monospaced type is distributed evenly

Fonts in which every letterform occupies the same horizontal space.

O

OpenType

Designed by Microsoft and Adobe, OpenType is a font format. It supplanted and improved upon TrueType and PostScript fonts.

Oblique or sloped roman

To be distinguished from italics, in which the letterforms are purposefully drawn to be different to their upright cousins. Oblique letters are merely slanted versions of the standard roman form, often arrived at by mechanical means.

Orphan

The first line of a new paragraph stranded at the bottom of a page. This is presumably considered to be as bad as abandoning a child.

P

Pica

One sixth of an inch in length, the pica is associated with line-length and column width. There are 12 points or 16 pixels in one pica.

Pilcrow

The paragraph symbol (¶). It now marks the presence of a carriage return but at one time is thought to have denoted a change of theme in flowing text.

P
X
CLOSE
A

R

Readability

Readability refers to the ease with which a block of text can be scanned by eye.

S

Serif



A flare or terminating flourish at the end of a letterform's strokes, believed to originate from the Roman tendency to paint letters onto marble before chiselling them out. The serifs are circled in the left hand text in the image above. On the right you can see a sans-serif font. Serif fonts are typically used for printed matter, while sans serifs are more suited for screen-based type.

Sidebearing

The horizontal space to either side of a letterform, separating it from other letters.

Spine

The main curved stroke of a lowercase or capital 'S'.

Squoosh

This is the inadvisable process of squashing or expanding a typeface digitally either to fit a space or for visual effect. If you do it, make sure you keep it to yourself.

Spur

A
CLOSE
X
S

A vertical, full-length stroke in upright characters.

T

TDC

The [Type Directors Club](#) is a typography organisation based in New York.

Tittle



The brilliantly suggestive name for the dot above letters 'i' and 'j'.

Terminal

A type of curve at the end of a stroke that isn't a serif. Examples include the teardrop shapes in: 'finial', 'ball', 'beak' and 'lachrymal'.

X

x-height

The height of the lowercase x in any given typeface. This delimits the size of the glyph's detail and therefore also of its ascenders and descenders.

Read more:

- [The best free web fonts](#)
- [Great places to download fonts for free](#)
- [20 typography terms you might not know](#)

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