

On Choosing Type

First Principles

Typography is not a science. Typography is an art. There are those who'd like to 'scientificize'; those who believe that a large enough sample of data will somehow elicit good typography. However, this sausage-machine mentality will only ever produce sausages. That typography and choosing type is not a science trammled by axioms and rules is a cause to rejoice.

“[typography] is a craft by which the meanings of text (or its absence of meaning) can be clarified, honored and shared...”

—Robert Bringhurst

Before we get to the nitty-gritty of choosing type, let's briefly talk about responsibility. Fundamentally, the responsibility we bear is two-fold: first we owe it to the reader not to hinder their reading pleasure, but to aid it; second, we owe a responsibility to the typeface or typefaces we employ. Good typefaces are designed for a good purpose, but not even the very best types are suited to every situation. Personally, I'm always a little nervous about using a newly acquired typeface. A new typeface is something like a newborn baby (though it doesn't throw-up on you): don't drop it, squeeze it too hard, hold it upside-down; in other words, don't abuse it, treat it respectfully, carefully.

If you've understood the above two paragraphs, then you'll know that what follows is not a set of rules, but rather a list of guiding principles.

Sans or Serif?

In my opinion, a lot of time is wasted attempting to prove that one is better than the other for setting extended text. I suggest that you ignore the vague and inconclusive findings of such ramblings and

decide for yourself. Oh, but seriffed types are better for extended text because the serifs lead your eye along... Stop! Nonsense.

Rather than write another ten paragraphs on this topic, I'll simply say that we read most easily that which we are most familiar with. And if you're in any doubt as to whether sans serif typefaces can be used for body text, then turn left at the end of aisle three and make your way over to the Swiss Typography department.

Guideline One: honour content

This, of course, should be every typographer's mantra. In fact, good typographers most likely won't even have to consciously think about this—it's instinctual. “[Typography] is a craft by which the meanings of text (or its absence of meaning) can be clarified, honored and shared...”—Robert Bringhurst.

It's worth mentioning here that these principles are equally applicable to any medium. Some of my favorite typefaces look dreadful on screen; and even good typefaces like Georgia or Verdana, designed especially for the screen, often look at best mediocre on paper. Choosing type for the web is easier owing to fewer choices; however, that's beginning to change. We now have sIFR and “web fonts,” so it's all the more important to think carefully about the type we use. Is Times/Times New Roman, narrow set and designed for narrow columns, really appropriate for long-line extended text on screen?

Guideline Two: read it

And, no, I'm not being facetious. If you're setting text, whether it be for a novel about the Franco-Prussian war or for a single-word headline, read it—really read it. Reading the text will give up vital clues, not only for choosing the right typeface or typefaces, but will also be an aid in the overall design of the page. An example: you're setting text for an essay on the history of blackletter; so you set the text in blackletter, right?