4.5 Good & Bad Typography



Layout, composition, grids, all those things are important. But you can really kill a good design with bad fonts. So we're going to talk about some good and bad choices.

Let's start with this one key concept-- good typography, good font choice happens when the meaning of the text is captured by the way the font looks. So we want to spend a lot of time thinking about, is this font the right choice? What works in one context probably won't work as well in another context. And another thing is, there isn't usually a single solution, only better and worst choices. So we're going to play with that a little bit.

But to make good typographical choices, you have to first totally understand what your data is about, and what is the story you're trying to tell. So this is a lot about meaning. And believe me, people can spend their whole profession being typographers-- being focused on what's the right font. People, if you're in a design class, or if you're a design student, you're probably going to take one or two whole classes on typography. So we're just going to scratch the surface.

But here's my first really awful bad example. So there's some guy named Big Ted, and Big Ted runs a Harley Davidson Bar. And he hires somebody to make a sign for him.

This is probably not a sign that's going to go over well, right? We imagine Big Ted to be tough. We imagine him to be a Harley Davidson biker. And the kind of clientele that he wants to attract is not going to necessarily be attracted by a bunch of really bright colors and a very playful font.

So let's pick something a little better. This is probably a little too straitlaced, but it's definitely better than the last one. We're more restrained on the colors. We're using black and white. And it's very straightforward.

This is safe. If you don't know what to do, be safe. But this is probably better. We're capturing the idea that there's something that Big Ted wants to communicate that's bold and is very black and white. This is Big Ted's bar. So in this case, I kind of feel like the meaning of the text is captured in the font choice I've made.

Could you do better? Yes, probably. There's millions of fonts out there. OK, I don't know if there's actually millions. But the point is when you scroll through all the fonts in Microsoft Word, there's a lot. And there's a lot of choices out there. And so when you look at your text, does the font you're choosing actually capture the meaning in there?

Let's look at another example. This is about Tina's Quilting Boutique. OK, I used the same font for the biker bar here. And it really doesn't work as well, does it? I imagine Tina to be-- or I imagine her quilting boutique to be a little bit more feminine.

So this is probably a safer choice. It's not quite as aggressive. It's not quite as in your face. It's not particularly feminine, but it's a safe choice.

This is probably the better choice. Now, I don't actually know anybody named Tina who has a quilting boutique. The point is just what I'm trying to do here is match the meaning of the text. What does Tina's quilting boutique bring to your mind? Well, it probably doesn't bring the biker bar font to mind.

Now, we can easily go overboard by choosing too many fonts. In fact, when we have too many fonts, we end up with what's called cognitive dissonance or cognitive challenge-- where we're trying to go through and figure out what the font means at the same time that we're trying to read the text. So just in general, try to avoid using too many fonts.

If your poster has more than three different fonts, there should be a really good reason for that. Too many fonts, again, becomes cognitively challenging for us to make sense of. So in general, go for something a little more consistent in your design choices.

Spacing is also really, really important. In this case, what I'm saying, look, when you have fonts that are all squished together like that, people are having a hard time reading it. And the whole point of putting text on a page is because you want somebody to read it. So try to find ways that make it easy for them to read.

I think I say that here when I say, give your text a more organized look. Give plenty of space around it. We talked about white space and grids before. So make sure that your text fits into that grid. Using right-justified, or center-justified, or justified is a choice you can always make. If you want really good tight grids use justified text all the way through.

If you want people to read your text, the main point here is make it easy for them. But you don't have to be totally safe. If you feel like you really understand what the text is trying to say, then you can step back and go through the list of fonts and say, which one of these really kind of looks like what it is that I'm trying to communicate with