

The Shape of Text —Christopher Swift

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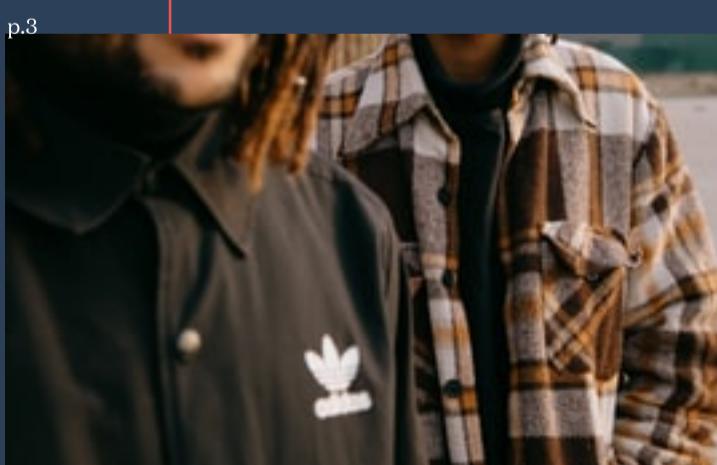
On the bookshelf, there are a very select handful of books that have made it through the various purges that proceed each move we make across the continent. The books, no longer needed for the academic research for which most of them were initially purchased, are now arranged by the color of the spine. They are the few that have made impacts enough that we know every part of them, we know them by name, idea, author, height, width, and color. The shelf is a chromatic mountain range; one color moves into the next as the heights and widths grow and dip in erratic waves and troughs. Almost all of the books have their own specific shape in the mountain; some Little Brown, Broadview, and Penguin Classics create short breaks of regularity with small collections of a particular author or topic, but for the majority of its run there is no pattern or plan visible. This topography is meaningful, but not obvious, the taller thinner books are not better or more valuable than the thin squatter volumes, the meanings are specific to the individual books. What seems like it might be merely a container for the actually important thing, a glossy packaging around the possibly profound words, is, in fact, part of the text, it is a part of the story. The volume, height, width, and depth they all are part of the whole, they are all decisions and choices made by a designer, a designer ideally who was thinking very hard about how to help the authors words be read, or felt, or understood. Every shelf full of books in the world, in its millions of various topographies, tells a small story about the effort and care that has shaped each of those volumes. The words are not all of a story, the almost invisible details that surround and hold those words are ideas that can add meaning and nuance, that can add an entire extra story for the reader to discover and experience, they are part of the conversation the reader has with the words, a part of the whole.

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Printers, publishers, book designers, and typographers have had hundreds of years to refine, explore, and experiment with printed pages. They have created beautiful solutions, developed standards of production, defined entire languages, and created new ways of measuring the world. The systems that were developed can be wildly complicated, maddeningly vague, poorly documented, and often all three. Still, designers use the tools and ideas daily to reproduce what has worked for centuries or to think of new ways to explore the relationship between the words and the pages.

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The change from analog to digital was so fast and so total that the design industry was caught entirely off guard, but then so was almost everyone. Typefaces that once pushed ink into the page alongside photographs exposed with chemicals, silver and light; both were no longer physical objects that existed in space; they became near-weightless bits of data, traveling around the world without physical boundaries. Very little went on unchanged by this digitization, and everyone needed to rethink how the world worked. But hundreds of years of repetition, of following the same rules and paths again and again, creates very stubborn ideas and rules. They can be so deeply embedded as to begin to feel like they have always been and that they can never change, and in an attempt to hold on to them, we try and apply what has always been on to the new thing, and always with limited success.

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This new space was so different that the engineers acting as early explorers mapped what they saw and invented with the names and ideas that they knew. Text would, as it always had, live on pages. The words would have structure enough to stand, but just barely. The engineers not knowing any better thought that the words were all that there was, that the text itself was the entire story and that if it could live without it, then it was not necessary, but being just alive and living are very different things. In an attempt to bring something beyond what the engineers who had built the internet had considered, designers started to apply the knowledge they had about text to this new space. As with early explorers in almost all of history, they got most everything wrong. Designers are starting to see this new space not as an analog to the printed page they know, but as something or somewhere free of constraints, with no rules so deeply practiced, no idea so deeply held that they will run afoul of those who defend those rules for the printed page.

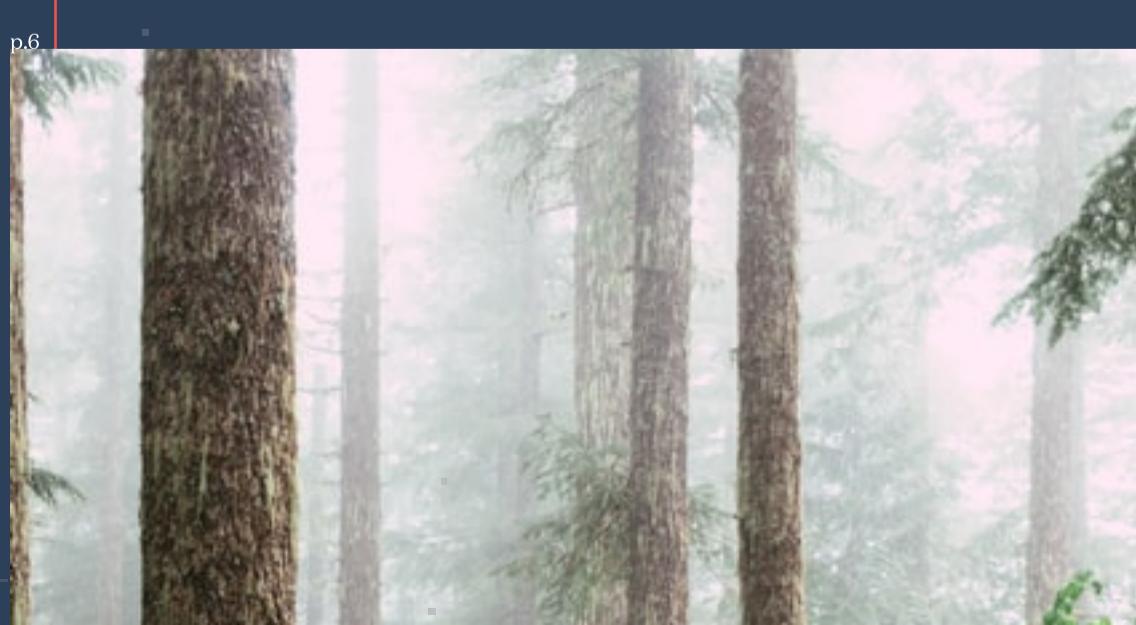
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The shape of printed pages, based in the hidden and sacred geometry and thinking about music scales by lunatics like Newton seeking divine structures in everything they could measure, see and create, are fundamental to how much of the history of book design and typography developed. Chapter 8 of Bringhurst's Elements of Typographic Style, Le Corbusier's The Modular, and Tschichold's The Form of the Book, each of them canonical, all are deeply concerned about our moral failings as proven by our lack of understanding and misuse of the page and its shape. The ratios that define the shapes of pages are an incredibly valuable relationship. With it, a designer can create complex systems of relations between every element that might be included on the page. The margins, measure, type size and scale, the placement of folios, all of these parts, their location, and size can be determined by simple calculations that relate to the shape of the page. It is complicated, and it can be ignored for very good reasons or for the reason of not knowing that it was even possible. Given that is complex and that very few people will know if you have considered it while developing your pages, many designers have claimed it as inconsequential, old fashioned, or showing off, as ways to excuse their lack of knowledge on the subject.

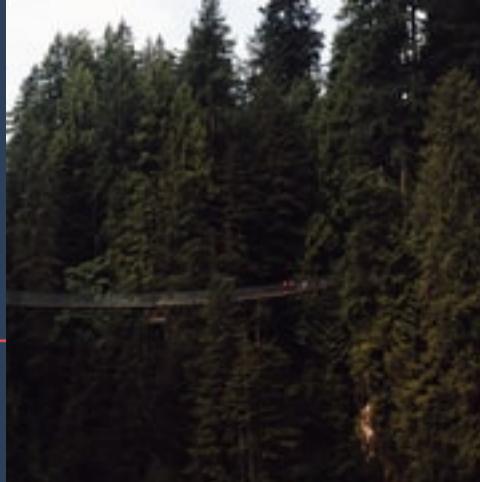
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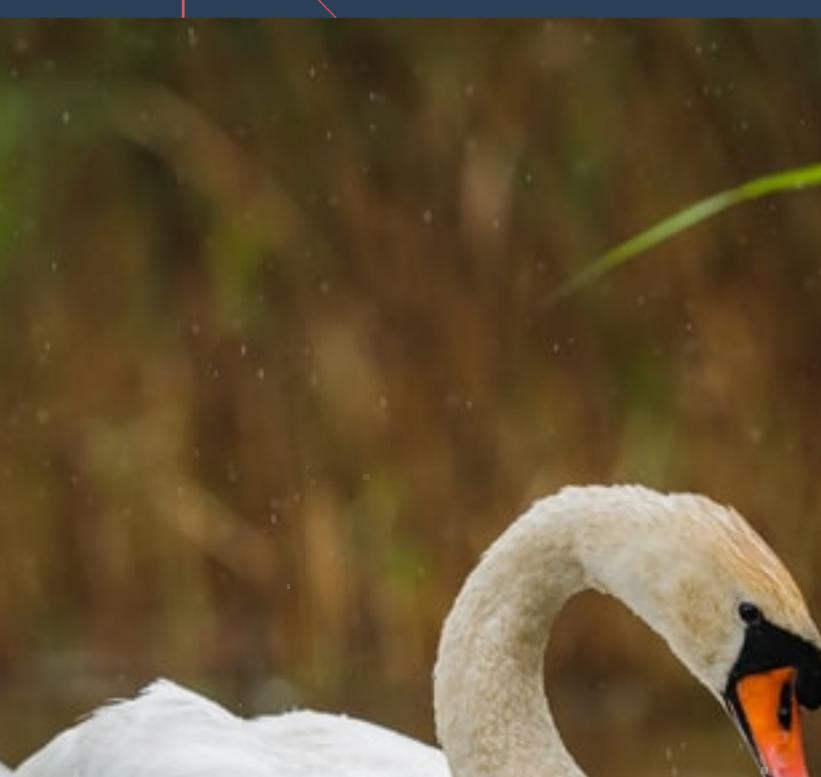
The transmission of text as data to various locations and devices has exploded what the shape of the page is, it has created an opportunity to rethink, to invent, to imagine something new. What shape is a book if it can be read on a phone, or a tablet, or on a watch face? The geometry of beautiful pages based on ideas like the Van DeGraff cannon, which could create complex and harmonious spreads for text, became as irrelevant as the idea of the back of a page. The new text has no use for spreads. It is not bound by or made more of by the shape of a page. Digital typography has, for the most part, addressed this new and changing space by attempting to force old ideas about structure onto an amorphous cloud, and it has failed. The words are left to float in arbitrary areas that at most don't hurt the ideas, but hardly ever add anything of value.

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The commercial interests of publishing often override the work of the designers when shaping a page. The well-considered margins that create easily read text in easy to parse measures with space for that text and the reader's eye to rest are seen by the publisher as empty and therefore wasted space. With the cost per page no longer a consideration in this shapeless digital void of data, the designer can experiment with line length, scale, and margins. Freedom from the physical makes space an unlimited resource. The accepted ideas and equations about the relationship between height and width and their impacts on the structure of design breakdown when those measurements become infinite.

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The margins of beautifully designed books can help reinforce an idea or even tell an entire chapter of the book by themselves. In *Where The Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak, a famous children's book published in 1963 and likely read millions of times, a subtle shifting of the margins of the book throughout express an entirely new idea that is not touched in the words of the text. The margins begin very large and shrink and shift as the book progresses until a full 3 spreads with full bleeds. The margins gently move back, taking back more of the page until the end of the book, but the margins never go back to how they started. If asked, most readers of this book would likely not recognize this journey being told by the margins, but it makes the story more than the words and drawings, even if you don't think you have seen it. Playing in and with a space that is so common that it is usually not even seen can subtly nudge a reader; it can make them just slightly aware that something is not quite right, that something that they can't pinpoint has changed. The designer in the English translation of *IQ84* by Haruki Murakami makes the text just a little more uncanny by creating a subtle shift in the margins of the facing pages and by creating movement on the location of the folios.



The pages, as they pass between your finger, as you turn each one and find your place in the top left of the new page, connecting the thoughts across the space, a reader can physically feel themselves moving through the space of the story. The weight and volume of the book and your place in its pages give hints about what is to come. There is an added anxiousness that can be felt as you approach the physical end of a text, unsure how the author will be able to finish all of what needs to be done in the pages they have left. The formless and pageless space of data is not bound in this manner. Forcing an imitation of the physical page space, or an infinite scrolling of potentially unlimited text are the current understandings of how to best use text in this space. The lack of real weight, the loss of the ability to feel where you are in a text by touch, the visual and material passage through reading are lost. Visible milestones; added data to show you where you are in the text via a progress bar help to find your bearings but feel hollow to as a solution. A new measure of text and something that feels possibly native and original to the space is not placing a point in space to mark, but a place in time. Sites like Medium show a reader a title, the author's name, publication date, and the estimated time expected for a reader to get through the text. The text, no longer tethered to physical pages becomes weightless, but having a beginning and an end, they can be given a structure by time.



While margins can successfully define the outer edges of simple prose on their own, complex texts can be helped by more intricate structures to guide the reader, to organize ideas, to clarify what is unclear. The internal area of the page bound by margins can further be divided. The pages interior sliced by horizontal and vertical lines that define precise units of internal organization that create a grid of lines to align the content with have been a technique of print designers for hundreds of years. The modern obsession with clarity and organization celebrated the Swiss International style grid system as defined by Josef Müller-Brockmann, and others make the grid system central to its work and ideas. The ability to organize, control, and use content with such precision and with a system that claimed to be universal and culturally agnostic became an enormous influence in almost all current design. The clumsy structures that described the engineer's early attempts at organizing the content of the new digital spaces became more and more refined and detailed as expectations about the economic possibilities of it grew. As the design industry began to pay more attention to the needs of this space, designers started again to map concepts developed over centuries about the printed page to this digital environment. Interest in organizing massive amounts of complex, varied, and often undefined content led to the rediscovery by digital designers of grid systems. The attempted mapping of this concept invented and refined over decades for use in print onto the digital world of the internet, with all of its very different tools and interactions, has made a thing that seems on the surface to help, but the structures it builds are based on no foundations and under the weight of use will collapse and have wasted a lot of time and energy. The grids that are being created have nothing to do with the shape of the space, they create no harmony, no underlying structure that can add anything but the most basic of organization. Grids by themselves are not capable of building harmonious relationships, they need context, they need edges and ratios to relate to. The pages that grids were refined on were over time were constant, each new project could be a different shape, but the shape maintained. The grid system did not anticipate variation. The printed page was static, the edges and borders never shifted, but the digital environment is various, it is liquid and borderless, the tools and ideas of one are mostly irrelevant to the other.

Marking difference with color, space, value, hue, luminosity, in almost any way, is how we create hierarchies. We contrast some definable aspect of a thing with another, we assign value to those aspects, and we mark a difference. These marks define and organize, they guide a reader through a text, they clarify the relationships between elements of the content. Type designers have applied various subtle markers to the alphabet, and typographers have assigned meanings to the differences created by these contrasts. Words created with all capitalized letters contrast with another word made of all lowercase, thick bolder letters contrast with the thin, creating a difference that can be employed to convey meaning to the reader. The physical and economic constraints of printed works have limited the range of ways to create the differences needed to build hierarchical systems. Typeface case, letterform slope, weight, scale, and space have been the traditional methods used. In the economic interest of fitting as much text as possible onto a page, scale and space have been used only in small amounts as those paying for the production of the text often see empty space as waste and something to be filled. Another cost-based limitation that designers often work inside of is the range of available colors. Printing in one color is traditional for many printed texts, the use of color to convey information about hierarchy is uncommon and costly. With the freedom from the physical and the limitations of page counts, with displays they can generate orders of magnitude more colors than human eyes can see, potential new ways of considering hierarchies for this new space exist.



A Pinot Noir, a Merlot, a Shiraz, or a Malbec are all incredibly different on the palate, or so I am told. Beyond the categories of red, white, dessert, and organic, the subtle and possibly very important differences in the classifications and types of wine are outside of my understanding and outside of my personal and professional interests. I believe that I will be able to happily move through my entire life, not knowing any more about wine than I do at this very moment. Typefaces are very similar to wine in this regard. Most people, I believe, understand type as I understand wine. San Serif, Serif, Comic Sans, and Papyrus; beyond that level of identification, no one really cares or can tell the difference. This does not mean that typeface selection is not important and valuable, but that just like margins or page-shape, they are a subtle communication that can help clarify a text. Just as a considered wine pairing by a talented sommelier might add levels of complexity and unexpected nuance to a meal, a well-considered font selection can add to the enjoyment or clarity or sense of tension or any number of other things to a text. Typeface selection and use are often a significant aspect of a printed text. Ensuring that the font family has enough built-in variation to support the texts hierarchy needs, considering if the typeface is structurally, culturally, historically, aesthetically appropriate to the content or themes of the text to be set, these aspects are ideally considered by the typographer and inform one of the major choices made in the design of the text. The engineers of the early internet made a choice based on an understanding of type and design that is similar to my knowledge of wine, they decided that thirteen typefaces were all that they would need to convey all of the information. Tablet manufacturers like Kindle support six fonts, every book available on a Kindle tablet has one of six typefaces, the same margins, the same leading, and the same type size. The digital space for all of its possibility has been disastrous when it came to type. The type design industry was slow to understand this new space, they as with most of the design world, attempted to map the old onto the new. The last few years have seen new ideas developed for the new space in the type industry, a type that is as fluid as the space itself, that can adapt with use and space.



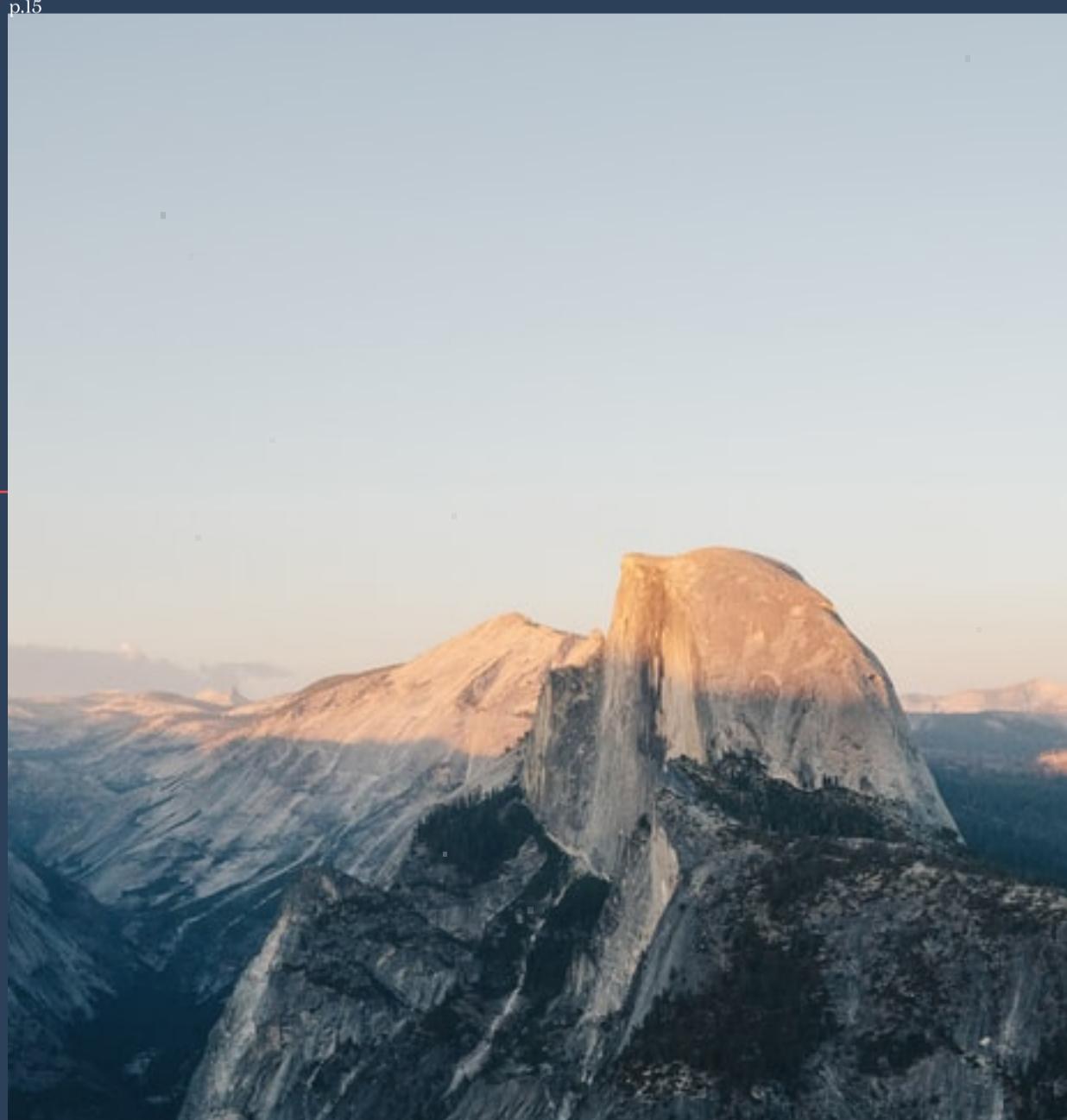
While page shapes, margins, grids, hierarchies, fonts can add clarity and additional meaning to a printed text, the format and style of the publication is often overlooked as a thing that can be read, a place full of meaning in itself. Eleven picas is a typical line length for a newspaper column; almost no one in the world knows that, but its narrowness has come to mean something specific; it contains in it a feeling of importance, of fleeting nowness, both ephemeral and meaningful. Printed texts in all of there various types and genres have made impressions on our culture. The shape and size of the pages, the way it folds, the volume of columns, the tightly set text, without reading a word on the page of a newspaper its function is understood. The nutritional information on a package, a US tax form, a note left under a windshield, the format, and structures of these can be read and understood. This cultural shorthand, these shared understandings allow us to navigate our lives and to make choices. Handed an essay to read, before even the title is considered, the author must overcome or relax in the assumptions that come along with the form of its publication. Before the first sentence is seen, the materials of the publication will undermine or bolster the ideas of the writer. The double spaced twelve-point default text, the lack of considered hierarchy, Microsoft's default margins, the editable Word doc submitted for review, not for reading, but seeking feedback, asking to be graded. The MLA requirements that burden a student are a neon sign flashing to the reader that this is not serious, this is seeking feedback on structure, this is a draft at best and a hoop that both the writer and the reader know must be passed through due to a requirement in a syllabus at worst. The impact on the reader based on the format alone undermines the arguments put forward.



In 1998 medical journal *The Lancet* was redesigned by Robert Waller. One of the communication problems Waller needed to solve was the introduction of non-peer-reviewed articles into the journal for the first time. *The Lancet*'s editors wanted to make sure that readers could easily differentiate between the types of content. Waller found that the two-column layout was clearly associated with peer-reviewed journals, so they set the new types of content in three columns. The addition of a column was enough to signal to the readers that the type of content had changed and that a different style of reading was needed. On March 6, 2005, *The New York Times* ran an article titled "One Part Mr. Peanut, One Part Hipster Chic" in Section E, Page 12. It was 600 words long and was a joke. It was what is often referred to as a "filler" story, it filled in a couple of empty inches on page 12 of section E. The format of these texts added information for the reader, they prepared them for the kind of information they would be engaging with. The format, the columns, the length, or the placement on the page, these subtle structures contain cultural information to be read. Stripped of this context and these cues texts become flat and meaning unclear. *The New York Times* received a lot of criticism about the monocle story, many readers were not getting the joke. These complaints came from an audience that had not seen the print version of the story but had read the digital publication on the paper's website or app. With the freedoms that digital publishing provides, the freedom from limitations like space allowed every story to have its own dedicated area, its own giant headline, its own photograph. With everything elevated to the same height, all of the complex nuance and shared cultural understandings about space and layout are lost. A short comedic article about monocle culture is given the same treatment as an article about the climate crisis, or 7 Nutritional Deficiencies of an Ex-Vegan. Designers, writers, and readers have not decided on the new shorthand's, the new meanings of structures, the new hierarchies of texts.

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The miniature mountain range on our bookshelf left undisturbed is as still as any real mountain. The words written, the inks printed, the paper trimmed and bound, all of the action of this making was at the start. A writer, designer, and publisher made choices about structure, about theme, about how the reader would engage with the text. The margins once set do not change, the text size, the font, these are all forever. The digital space makes each text an ocean; it has no edges, no shape. Each ocean poured into any container, editable, and amorphous. The digital publishing space is still very new. We have not caught up to the changes, they happen faster than we can understand. We will need some time to appreciate the subtleties, to find the meaning in the structures and details.

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The End

