

HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF TYPOGRAPHY

Although we tend to think of typography as a relatively modern invention, the practice of imprinting symbols into soft or malleable surfaces has been around for thousands of years. We can find examples in ancient Mesopotamia, where clay cylinder seals were engraved with financial transactions, official signatures, and even protection 'devices'.

While in essence you can call any letter or symbol written by humans typography, we mostly associate the word with its contemporary definition, which traces its roots to 1450 and Johannes Gutenberg's introduction of the metal movable-type printing press.

But what transforms a letter into a unique and instantly recognizable sign? Can we identify common elements that are shared by all styles of lettering? Is there a classification system to help us make sense of typography's timeline?

Join us while we take a closer look at the anatomy of type, from Roman square capitals and Venetian serifs to the Bauhaus movement and decorative fonts!

TYPE DISTRIBUTION & INITIAL FORMS

Before we, the Fontfabric foundry for type design, got into details, let us first take a glance at how others divide and classify typefaces, and what some early developments looked like.

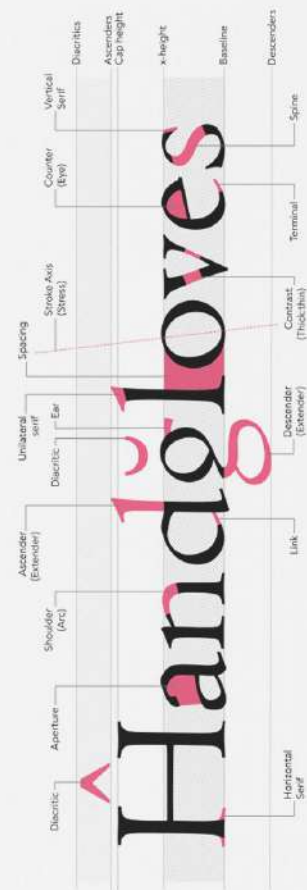
Perhaps the most widespread system is the one designed by Maximilien Vox in 1954, which divides typefaces into nine separate categories based on common features or chronological periods. In 1962 this system was further expanded into 10 categories by the Association Typographique Internationale (ATypI), and it remains in use to this day.

The divisions featured below are not 'locked', meaning that any font can exhibit features from one or more at the same time:

- Classical (Humanist / Garamond / Transitional)
- Modern (Didone / Mechanistic / Linéal)
- Calligraphic (Glyphic / Script / Graphic / Gaelic / Blackletter)
- Non-Latin (Greek, Cyrillic, Arabic, etc.)

Mediums of human communication are in perpetual motion, and writing is no different. It has taken humanity from the earliest hunter-gatherer societies to the very reaches of outer space, and together with mathematics occupies a vital part of our common knowledge and culture.

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ROMAN INFLUENCE

Before the arrival of heavy machinery, we dealt with many tasks by hand, and in Europe this led to the development of the chiseled Roman square capitals known simply as Capitalis Monumentalis. Boosted by the immense power and geographic spread of the Roman Empire, they set the stage for the entire Western-type structure, later unfolding into writing styles of their own.

Italic example: Trajan, Colosseum
Blackletter examples: Petrus, Teutonic Schwarz
Bücher

These included the dynamic Rustic capitals, as well as the uncrossed uncial, which helped shape the Carolingian minuscule lowercase ovals with their distinctive ascenders and descenders. An increasingly-literate population had a growing appetite for books, leading to some purely functional changes, such as letters becoming less wide in order to accommodate a faster writing style and save resources. The result was Blackletter (or "fractura"), a style of medieval handwriting that uses a broad-nibbed pen to produce heavy, often angular letter shapes, and condensed counters.

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Johannes Gutenberg

One of the chief reasons for writing's ubiquity as a communication tool is Gutenberg's printing press, and more precisely, the moveable type that first allowed for the composition of single glyphs into longer lines of text.

The precise and limited number of alphabetic characters of the first Gutenberg font influenced its success, standing in stark contrast to the millions of possible glyph combinations in East-Asian scripts, where woodcarving proved easier. Metal's higher durability and the option for a consistent aesthetic across a single font further boosted the technology's reputation and eventually established it as the prevalent form in Europe.

A special typeface was designed for the world's first printed book – the first font of the Gutenberg Bible – based on Textura and Schwabacher due to their condensed counters and increased spacing. The technique would allow for more characters per line, and in turn, more information per page.

CLASSICAL TYPOGRAPHY

Humanist

Examples: Garamond, Jenson

These bracketed and often asymmetrical serifs are sometimes called "Venetian", after the Italian city famous for its active printing community. They tend to have consistent stress angles, moderate stroke contrast, and generally exhibit a strong connection between the actual glyph forms and the writing tool being used, in this case a broad-nibbed pen.

Innovative printers like Nicola Jenson designed their work in opposition to the condensed blackletter-inspired type used in Germany, which suffered from poor legibility and cluttered, disorienting layouts. This practice formed from the merger of two separate styles – the Carolingian minuscule with its balanced and wide lowercase letters, and the triumphal and imposing Roman Imperial Capitalis.

Italy in the early Renaissance period was a place of technological wonder and conceptual redefinition. As society's focus shifted from medieval philosophies to the idea of free will, artists and artisans alike began experimenting in their own fields, defining the period in typography as Humanist.

Garamond (Aldine)

Examples: Bembo, Garamond

The next typeface segment is characterized by uniform consistency with a larger contrast, as well as moderate weight and an oblique axis. Its name is a portmanteau of two typography greats and major figures from the Renaissance era – French punchcutter Claude Garamond and Italian publisher Aldus Manutius.

The French king Francis I proved to be a shrewd reformer, taking advantage of technological advancements to start a reorganization of the country's language and grammar, earning him the title of "Father and Restorer of Letters".

Transitional (Realist / Réales)

Examples: Garamond, Jenson

Historically related to the rational spirit of the Enlightenment period, these fonts had hints of calligraphy but mostly relied on a bigger stroke contrast, stylized shapes with bracketed serifs and round, bulbous terminals.

The name "réal" can be traced to the Spanish term for "royal", and relates to the French king Louis XIV and his desire to produce an honourable successor to Garamond, as well as a worthy competitor/counterpart to Europe's current printing trends. By this point engraving techniques had become more complex, allowing for bigger contrast and finer details, which interacted well with the prevailing art styles of the time – Baroque and Rococo.

Realism.com

CLASSICAL TYPOGRAPHY