

Typography and Readability

HEY! What IS typography? "...a visual and verbal equation that helps the reader understand the form and absorb the substance of the page content." Lynch, Web Style Guide

Onscreen viewing presents basic readability and typographic challenges!
Type too small, too large? too blurry? too chunky? Too many shadow effects?
Due to web limitations we have to compromise...for now.

Legibility and Readability defined

Legibility is how easy it is to identify letters and/or short bursts of text.

Readability refers to how easy it is to scan and READ large amounts of text.

In Typography: Legibility is inherent in the typeface design. Readability is dependent on how the designer handles the type.

Large x-height

Small x-height

**Broadway
(no descenders)**

ALL CAPS FACE

Legibility Guidelines

- Sans serif is most legible because the letterforms are clear and undistorted.
- Avoid too large of an x-height
- Avoid faces with no descenders (Hobo) or an all caps face (Trajan, Peignot)
- Don't use ALL CAPS because they have no word shape (called Coastline)

Readability Guidelines

Sans serif typefaces

- Typefaces with no serifs look cleaner onscreen and are easier to read.

Type size

- Ideally 10-14 points (font face 2 or 3). In CSS consider defining type in pixels rather than points for more cross-platform and browser consistency.

Line lengths

- Don't use long line lengths: use columns created by tables. 10-12 words per line.
- Don't use really short line lengths either.

Type style

- Don't use large amounts of bold, italic, caps, etc

Lowercase

- We read by word shape. Lowercase words provide a visual "coastline" that helps us see the word's shape and read it more easily.

Alignment

- Left alignment is easiest to read because the reader always know where to find the beginning of the next line.
- Keep headlines and subheadings left aligned too. It looks better!

Leading

- Leading is the white space between lines of type that guides the eye from one line to the next.
- Use more leading for bolder typefaces or ones with large x-heights.
- Leading can only be defined in Cascading Style Sheets (not HTML).

Paragraph spacing

- Indents or paragraph returns NOT BOTH!
- Make sure subheadings are closer to the paragraph they refer to (Use
)

If it looks hard to read,
it is!
Read Robin's critiques
of examples on
page 222.

Cascading Style Sheets
may offer more
leading possibilities.

Background

- Type should have a strong contrast with background. Black type on white is best.

Typeface selection

The x-height is the size of the lowercase letters minus ascenders and descenders.

- Select legible typefaces designed for onscreen reading (Verdana, Georgia, or city-named fonts)
- Use sans serif fonts
- Look for typefaces with fairly large x-heights
- Avoid Times Roman! It looks awful onscreen. Use only for documents that will be printed out (it is specifically designed for print)

Typeface mixing

- Don't use more than 2 typefaces in your design. Keep it simple!
- Select 2 typefaces that contrast, e.g. slab serif and a sans serif
- Avoid overusing too many styles (bold, italic) within the same type family

Tables for more control and specific line lengths

- Tables give you line length control (fixed width) and establish gutters/margins.
- Gutters (keep columns from running into each other). Use cell spacing (or padding) or create an empty cell that acts as a gutter.
- Borders: don't use borders (border=0), they add clutter.
- Invisible images: use them to keep table cells from collapsing when browser window is too small.
- You can mix alignments in tables (subheads flush right to paragraphs flush left).
- Use tables within tables (no more than 3 deep however).

Browser and Cross platform issues

- Aaack! type size: 12 pt on Mac looks like 14 pt on Windows!
- Way to see what cross platform may be seeing on your page: Change Preferences in your browser (Mac: change to 14, Windows: change to 11 or 10)
Internet Explorer: use "Larger" or "Smaller" on button bar.

Use Photoshop or Illustrator to create text effects and then save them as a GIF.

Type as Graphic

If you really want control, create graphics of your type. Appropriate for Nav bars, Headers, etc. Illustrator and/or Photoshop work well! Use them to kern, size, edit, etc. Remember though, it is more complicated to edit/update text saved as an image!

Typographic Refinements: special characters

- Real Quotes: it is kind of a pain, but someone has to uphold the standards of beautiful type. Many web development programs (Dreamweaver) insert real quotes automatically for other special characters (e.g. em dashes) look for a "special characters" menu choice under the Insert menu.
open quote = " “
close quote = " ”
- Real apostrophes
opening single ‘
closing single ’
- Dashes:
en dash – (use to show duration: Mon–Fri)
em dash — (use to show a change in thought — hmmm)
ellipsis … (use to show omitted text, etc ...)

Typographic Refinements: kerning

- Kerning means selectively reducing or increasing the space between individual pairs of letters to make them look equally spaced. (In Photoshop you can find the kerning adjustment directly under the type size with the icon AV. Click between two letters and change the kerning number in the character palette). Kerning only needs to be applied to large sizes of type (usually over 14 point).

Type (unkerned) Type (kerned)

Type Styles for Emphasis

- Type with any styles attached (italic, bold, etc) is harder to read. Use sparingly!
- Italic: book titles, periodical titles, stressed or foreign words/phrases, captions. Avoid in lengthy text.
- Bold: primarily for subheads. If you use too much bold for emphasis throughout text it loses its effectiveness.
- Underlined: Don't do it. Underline lost its power when computer came on scene (it was all the typewriter had for emphasis), but it has found a new role as “web hyperlink” designation!
- Color text: beware not to confuse readers, they may think text is hyperlinked. Good for subheads.

Proportional vs. monospaced fonts

- Proportional (variable width): “I” takes up less room than a “W”. Best for readability.
- Monospaced (fixed width): all characters are equal width, good for text that needs to line up in columns like spreadsheets. Monoco, Courier, and OCR are monospaced.

Contrast for Dynamic Type!

Contrast plays an important role in typography as well as in design. It communicates visual organization and enhances meaning and mood. Use contrasts in size, color, font, angle, type texture, type style etc. to create dynamic type effects. Try creating type patterns by using dark subheads and medium text color or by creating blocks of varying weights of text (not ideal for readability!).

Break the rules

Once you understand the rules, it's OK to break them. However, if you do break the rules, compensate for it. Example: if you reverse type—use a larger point size on a shorter line length.