

rules of good typography

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- Insert only a single space after all punctuation.
- Use proper em and en dashes where appropriate.
- Use true quotation marks and apostrophes.
- Use a smaller point size for all-uppercase text.
- Add letterspacing to capitalized text and small caps.
- Use oldstyle figures when available and where appropriate.
- Use boldface text sparingly.
- Avoid using underlined text.
- The © (copyright), ® (registered trademark), and ™ (trademark) characters almost always need to be reduced, sometimes by as much as 50%, depending on the font.
- Use the true ellipsis character (...) rather than periods.
- Decrease the size of the ballot boxes.
- Consider using other characters beside bullets (•).
- Increase line spacing to improve readability in body text.
- Sans serif typefaces are often less legible than serif typefaces.
- You can probably set body text to a point size smaller than you think.

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Insert only a single space after all punctuation.

If you grew up prior to the advent of desktop publishing, chances are you were taught to put two spaces after periods, question marks, exclamation marks, and colons. The rationale was that it is easier for the eye to distinguish sentences in this fashion. When using monospaced fonts (read: typewriter fonts), there might be some validity to this. But this only applied to documents created with a typewriter. Since the advent of the printing press in the 15th century, typesetters have never inserted two spaces after punctuation. As far as I can tell, the practice of inserting two spaces between sentences originated with high school typing teachers. It sure didn't originate in the world of typography. I've heard the technique referred to as the "French method," and despite their admiration for Jerry Lewis, I doubt even the French would adopt such a method. When preparing text for printing, regardless of the font, use only one space after all punctuation. There are no exceptions to this. Well, except one. While not necessary, it is acceptable and often more readable when composing e-mail (text that will be read online and not printed) to insert two spaces after periods, question and exclamation marks, and colons.

Use proper em and en dashes where appropriate.

Also a throwback to the days of typewriters, two hyphens--like these--were used to make a dash because true dash characters are not available on a typewriter. But this is a major no-no in typesetting and desktop publishing, where em dashes—like these—should be used instead. An em is a unit of measure equal to the point size you are using. For example, using 10-point type, an em dash would be approximately 10 points (approx. 0.14 inches) wide, but this is dependent on the individual typeface. Actually, this is probably the widest it would be. Many typefaces have em dashes that are slightly narrower than a full em, but still considerably wider than a hyphen.

Hyphens are used to hyphenate words and separate phone numbers. They should never be used as dashes. A dash, more specifically, an em dash, is a form of punctuation used to offset clauses in a sentence.

An en dash is typically half the length of an em dash (sometimes slightly wider than half, depending on the typeface) but still longer than a hyphen. En dashes are primarily used to denote duration, as in 8:00–5:00, or August 12–14, or Aardvark–Adelaide. Some people use them to separate phone numbers, but I think they are too large and look awkward for this.

The hyphens appear much more natural. We are used to seeing phone numbers represented in this fashion. Some people avoid the hyphen vs. en dash question altogether by using periods or spaces to separate phone numbers.

The period is preferable to the space, but this is purely a matter of personal taste. Phone numbers separated by spaces are quite common in Europe, less so in the U.S. When creating em and en dashes, you can add space before and after the dash, or not. I prefer to add either a small amount of space (usually via the application's kerning commands), or no space at all. Page layout programs such as Adobe PageMaker and QuarkXPress let you adjust space between characters at a micro level (i.e., kerning), as do illustration programs such as Illustrator and FreeHand, but many word processors are limited in this regard and only allow you to add space via the Space Bar. The normal space created with the Space Bar seems a bit too wide for my tastes, but you may find it acceptable. Generally speak-

ing, the wider the column of text, the more space you can insert before and after dashes (up to a full space). In a typical word processed document such as a memo or letter, for example, where your column width might be as great as 5 or 6 inches, inserting a normal space before and after a dash looks just fine. But in a document with narrower columns, say a newsletter with three columns of text, this much space will stand out, and your dashes will resemble diving boards. In this case, I would suggest adding no space at all, and simply use the program's kerning commands (if available) to tweak the space as necessary.

In QuarkXPress, press Cmd-Shift in conjunction with the Left and Right Bracket keys to kern text. Hold down the Cmd, Shift, and Option keys if you want to kern in smaller units. In QuarkXPress, consider a value of about 20 before and after a dash.

If you do add a full space by pressing the Space Bar, it is important to add it before and after the dash. Sometimes people will add a space after a dash to break a line. Then, if they edit the text or change the layout, the dash with a space after it but no space before will appear rather awkward looking.

To create an em dash in most Mac applications, press Shift-Option-hyphen. To create an en dash, press Option-hyphen.

To create an em dash in most Windows applications, press Alt-0151.
To create an en dash, press Alt-0150.

Some expert font sets contain a three-quarter em dash, but in reality, most em dashes are about this wide anyway. That is, most em dashes are not one em in width, and depend on the individual typeface. The three-quarter em dash can be substituted for the em dash. The two are interchangeable. But it is too wide to be used when you would normally use an en dash.

It is also acceptable to use an en dash instead of an em dash to set off clauses in text. I don't like the practice, but it's not incorrect to do so. If you do substitute en dashes, consider adding space before and after them.

Use true quotation marks and apostrophes.

Quotation marks and apostrophes you enter directly from your keyboard by typing ' and " (Shift + ') are not really quotation marks, but rather hash marks (or tick marks). It's okay to use them to represent feet and inches (e.g., I have a 9'6" Walden surfboard), but using them as quotation marks sends the message, "I don't really care how this stuff looks." Like inserting two spaces between sentences and using hyphens as dashes, using tick marks instead of curly quotes (also called typographer's quotation marks) is the calling card of a DTP amateur.

True quotes and apostrophes should be used in place of tick marks whenever possible. Fortunately, most DTP applications and word processors made within the past few years give you the option of automatically substituting curly quotes when you type the ' and " characters. This feature is referred to as Smart Quotes.

Punctuation Inside vs. Outside Quotation Marks

There is some debate amongst the various style guides as to whether to place punctuation inside or outside quotation marks...and whether to use single or double quotes. The American standard is to place punctuation (commas, periods, etc.) inside the quotation marks. The British standard is to place them on the outside. The Brits generally use single quotes in place of double quotes too, but this can pose some minor unsightliness if the text you are quoting ends with a contraction.

Use a smaller point size for all-uppercase text.

When entering all-uppercase letters such as titles, acronyms, initials, and other capitalized text passages — WYSIWYG, BMWRA, USA, or any string of text made up of two or more capital letters — use a point size that is slightly smaller than the surrounding text. Otherwise, your capitals will SCREAM at the reader. In text that is 10-point, set the uppercase text to 8.5 points. Of course it depends on the typeface, but generally a reduction of 1–1.5 points is sufficient for text 11 points and smaller. A 2-pt or greater reduction may be necessary for text larger than 12 points.

To see how well your CAPITALIZED text looks when you reduce its size, print it and turn the page upside down. It should blend in. If not, consider reducing the size a little more. Many programs have a formatting option called Small Caps, which creates a capital letter that is about 70–80% the size of the surrounding text. Unless you can adjust the setting (and in applications such as PageMaker and QuarkXPress you can), I think this is a tad too small. Just like you don't want to draw attention to text that is too big, you also don't want to draw attention to text that is too small. An optimal size for small caps is somewhere in the range of 80–90% of the size of the surrounding text.

Another option is to use true small caps, if they are in fact available. But I often use small cap fonts for titles only, and not for capitalized text within normal text. Of course, you can use true small caps in such a fashion, and for fine typography you should. It's easier, however, to type text from the regular font in all uppercase and then select it and reduce its point size, than it is to change to the small cap font, type the text, and then change it back to the regular font. There's also the added benefit of using fewer fonts (the fewer fonts in a document, the quicker it will print).

Add letterspacing to capitalized text and small caps.

Letterspacing refers to the amount of space between letters in a word. Normal body text ordinarily needs no additional letterspacing beyond that which is built into the fonts. Capitalized text or small caps appearing within normal text can appear too tight and crowded compared to the surrounding text, and really needs to be loosened up a bit. Programs such as PageMaker, QuarkXPress and Illustrator, for example, refer to this letterspacing as tracking, and it should be set to a positive value for capitalized text. In PageMaker and Illustrator, consider setting the tracking to a value of 20 or so. In QuarkXPress, try a value of about 2 or 3 (obviously we're talking different measurement systems in these programs, but the results are about the same).

Most word processors don't handle this as elegantly as page layout and illustration programs. Word 5.1 for the Macintosh, for example, lets you expand text as opposed to tracking it, but this can be problematic. The tracking features in the programs mentioned above adjust automatically to compensate if you decide to change the point size. Word's expand setting, on the other hand, is a fixed value entered in points, so the amount of space it adds is the same regardless whether your text is 10 points or 100 points. There are exceptions to this: Nisus Writer offers tracking to letterspace text. If your word processor doesn't have a tracking command, you should leave the text as is. Don't add letterspacing by typing the Space Bar between letters. This adds way too much space.

Use oldstyle figures when available and where appropriate.

Oldstyle figures are also known as non-lining numerals. The term non-lining is used because the numerals do not all line up on the baseline as do regular, or lining, numerals. In this regard, it might help to think of oldstyle figures as lowercase numbers. Oldstyle figures, like lowercase letters, contain characters that descend below the baseline. Uppercase

letters, on the other hand, as well as lining numerals, do not descend below the baseline. The regular numbers available in fonts, just like uppercase alphabetic characters, are aligned to the baseline. Think of these numbers as uppercase numbers.

Use boldface text sparingly.

Avoid the temptation to use boldface text to emphasize words within a passage of text. Bold text is like a magnet to our eyes, and if used incorrectly, ruins the continuity of your text. I once heard someone describe paragraphs containing boldface text as looking like chocolate chip cookies. And that's an apt description. Bold words stand out like little chocolate bits. Bold text is best used in headings, captions, logos or sometimes at the start of a paragraph as a stylistic device. In place of bold, consider using italics for emphasis. Italics blend in more smoothly with surrounding text, yet clearly indicate emphatic stress. Or simply write in such a way that the emphasis is apparent without having to rely on font or style changes (easier said than done, he said, with a flick of the Italic command). Reserve boldface for items that can be set entirely in bold, and avoid mixing with normal, or non-boldface, text.

Avoid using underlined text.

Even more distracting than boldface text is underlined text, which is a typographic abomination that should be avoided. Back in the days of typewriters, underlining was the accepted, if not only way to add emphasis. Unfortunately, this carried over into the design of operating systems, explaining why we have Underline commands under our Format menus when we never use the feature. When typesetting, underlined text is only used in special situations such as financial or academic publications. It is also common in the design of web pages.

The © (copyright), ® (registered trademark), and ™ (trademark) characters almost always need to be reduced, sometimes by as much as 50%, depending on the font.

The trademark symbol ™ you create by typing Option-2 on the Mac or Alt-0153 in Windows is already superscripted, and usually sized correctly for the font. In programs such as PageMaker, for instance, I still prefer to type the letters 'T' and 'M' and superscript them. I set the superscript size option to 50%. This creates a trademark slightly smaller than the trademark character.

The copyright symbol © you create by typing Option-G on the Mac or Alt-0169 in Windows is too large. I prefer this character to be approximately 70% the size of the surrounding text. If your body text is 12 points, for example, the copyright symbol should be set to 8.5 points. This varies from font to font, but I try to set the size of the symbol to the x-height. Unlike the trademark symbol, the copyright symbol should not be superscripted, rather it should remain on the baseline.

The registered trademark symbol ® you create by typing Option-R on the Mac or Alt-0174 in Windows is also too large. This character can be placed either on the baseline like the © symbol, or superscripted like the ™ symbol. If you place it on the baseline, reduce its size exactly as you would the copyright symbol, that is, reduce it so that it matches the x-height. If you superscript it, reduce its size to 60% that of the surrounding text.

Use the true ellipsis character (...) rather than periods.

The ellipsis is used to denote a rhetorical pause or omission in a quotation. An ellipsis can be made up of periods, but dashes and sometimes even asterisks are used. The latter hasn't seen widespread use since the early part of this century, but the dash is quite commonly used as an elliptical mark indicating interruption...

...or omission...

Elliptical periods, however, are the most common form of the ellipsis. In fact, when I use the term "ellipsis" I am actually referring to elliptical periods. People often create an ellipsis by typing the period three or four times, but you should use the ellipsis character, which is a standard character in most fonts, instead. You create an ellipsis by typing Option-Semicolon on the Mac or Alt-0133 in Windows. The ellipsis character looks better than three consecutive periods because it has slightly more space between each dot.

Compare the faux ellipsis on top to the ellipsis character below:

If the ellipsis comes at the end of a sentence, many grammarians insist that it should be followed by a period. But this is a grammatical rule, not a typographical one, and it's broken quite often. It's not a rule I follow. If you do opt to add the period, you may need to manually kern it so that it is spaced equally with the other dots in the ellipsis. In many fonts, you won't have to worry about it, but this isn't always the case. In some fonts, the period may appear too close to the ellipsis, in which case it should be kerned...or deleted altogether.

When creating an ellipsis, you should consider adding a small amount of space (via your application's kerning commands) before and after it, or no space at all. The normal space created with the Space Bar is too wide to place before an ellipsis, although it is okay to place a full space after it if it appears at the end of a sentence.

Decrease the size of the ballot boxes.

The ballot box characters available in the Zapf Dingbats font should be set smaller than the surrounding text. Ballot boxes are oh-so popular among desktop publishers, and are created by typing the O, P, Q, and R keys when the Zapf Dingbats font is selected. As a general rule, these characters should be about two points smaller than surrounding text. In the following example on the left, all text and ballot boxes are set using the same point size; in the example on the right, the ballot boxes are set slightly smaller than the text.

I tend to think these ballot boxes are a tad overused, however. They serve a definite purpose — that is, as check boxes on forms, reply cards, and of course, ballots — but I see them used quite often in place of bullet characters, and in this role they look kind of cheesy.

Consider using other characters beside bullets (•).

The bullet character (•) you create by typing Option-8 on the Mac, or Alt-0149 in Windows is rather boring and overused. Consider using more attractive symbols such as the ¶ symbol (Option-7, Alt-0182) available in most fonts. Symbol fonts offer a wide variety of bullet style characters. Zapf Dingbats for the Mac and Wingdings for Windows are only two of the countless symbol fonts available. Sean's Symbols, which is available by ordering the FontSite 500 CD also has several special characters that can be used in place of the bullet character.

Like ballot boxes, I recommend slightly decreasing the size of bullets as compared to the surrounding text. The amount varies with the bullet you are using and the text font you have chosen. Generally speaking, a 20–30% size reduction should suffice.

Increase line spacing to improve readability in body text.

Line spacing, also called “leading,” because printers used to insert thin strips of lead between lines of type to add space, is very important not only for readability but also for appearance. When setting text for continuous reading (this does not necessarily apply to headline or display text) words should be set close to each other, about as far apart as the width of the letter ‘i’. Of course, you don’t really have to worry about this because it’s accomplished automatically by your word processing or page layout software. Line spacing, measured from baseline to baseline, needs to be significantly greater than this, and is something you need to worry about for the simple reason that the default settings of most word processors and page layout programs is rarely satisfactory.

As a general rule, the amount of space between lines, expressed as a percentage of point size, should be no less than 120%. For example, if your text is 10-point, you should consider a line spacing setting of at least 12 points. If a typical line contains more than about 12 words, however, a leading value of 120% may not be enough. In other words, leading should be increased proportionally as line length increases.

The leading you choose depends on the typeface, but generally speaking, there are no text faces that look bad with more leading, although decreasing the leading can make just about any font look bad as a text font. As a display font, such as in headlines for example, decreased leading, even negative leading, may be appropriate.

Most Oldstyle designs, typefaces such as Bembo, Caslon, Garamond, and Adobe Minion, for example, do not require leading beyond the 120% mentioned above. Transitional designs such as Baskerville and Times Roman require a bit more, and Moderns such as Bodoni and Walbaum require even more still. Again, exact amounts will depend on point size and line length, but keep this general knowledge in mind as you use these typefaces. Quite often people will come to me for advice on a document, telling me that something is not quite right about it, but that they don’t know what that something is. In just about every case it comes down to two problems: their line length is too long, and the leading is too little. Decreasing the former and increasing the latter – or a combination of both – improves the appearance and transforms the “not quite right” into the “pretty neat.” Font choice and justification options are almost always secondary concerns to leading and line width. If you are using sans serif typefaces for body text, leading needs to be increased even more, sometimes to as much as 135–140% of point size. For example, a 10-point sans serif font would probably look best with line spacing set somewhere between 13 and 14 points. Unlike body text where a baseline leading of 120% of the point size is suggested, for headlines I generally begin with solid leading, and increase or decrease it from there. Solid leading means that the line spacing is equivalent to the point size. If my headline is 24 points, for example, a solid leading would also be 24 points.

Many programs have a leading setting of “Auto,” which is usually about 120% of the point size, but I recommend setting the leading to a fixed amount. If I’m using 10 point text, for example, I set the leading to 12 points even though choosing the “Auto” leading option might very well do this anyway. Then if I need to change the size of a character or word, the leading won’t be automatically adjusted; it will remain at 12 points.

Have you ever seen fonts indicated as “Garamond 10/12,” for example, or “Futura 12/15”? The first number is the point size, the second is the leading. This is the standard notation when specifying type. You may sometimes see line length included as well, generally in the form “Fontname 10/12 x 20.” Line length – the third number – is given in picas, not points. In this case, 20 picas. (One pica equals 12 points.)

Sans serif typefaces are often less legible than serif typefaces.

When setting body text (and by that I mean text that is meant to be read continuously) serif typefaces are naturally better suited than sans serif typefaces. Serifs are the small finishing strokes on the arms and stems of letters, and serve to form a link between letters. This link is important because when we read, our mind (in most western cultures anyway) is trained to recognize the shapes of words rather than reading letter by letter. All of the serif text faces are appropriate for continuous reading. Many sans serif typefaces are as well. Consider sans serif fonts such as Gill Sans, Goudy Sans, and Optima for setting text meant for continuous reading. This isn't to say that you shouldn't use other sans serif fonts for body text, but generally speaking, avoid setting long passages of text in geometric sans serif typefaces such as Futura, for example, which is better suited for headlines, captions, and other short chunks.

When designing forms such as time sheets, invoices, expense reports and order forms, consider using sans serif typefaces rather than serifs. Sans serifs naturally look better when aligned to vertical and horizontal lines, which are obviously very common in forms. For best results, use loosely spaced All Caps set at a small size (8 points and below). Typefaces such as Futura and Franklin Gothic are particularly well-suited to designing forms.

You can probably set body text to a point size smaller than you think.

Type size for body text generally ranges from 9 to 14 points. Keep in mind that text set too small can be difficult to read in large quantities. On the other hand, text set too large might appear trivial, or meant for children, à la Dick and Jane books. If you're new to the world of type and document design, you can probably set text a bit smaller than your initial choice. A point size of 12 is probably the most common size, and on the screen it may even look rather petite, but when you print it, chances are it will appear larger than you thought. I recommend starting with 10-point text, then increase or decrease it a point or half-point as necessary. To my eyes, 12-point type looks absolutely huge, and this is probably the largest point size I would use for setting body text.

If your documents are intended primarily for on-screen display, as opposed to printed output, 12-point text is a good minimum. Of course, this depends on the typeface and whether or not it has legible bitmaps for small point sizes. Typefaces like Geneva on the Macintosh, and MS Sans in Microsoft Windows, are quite attractive and readable at 9 points (okay, maybe not attractive), but a typeface such as Times Roman will be difficult to read on-screen below 10 points.

rules of good typography

redux

Alignment

Everything on the page should align with something else. A grid is an effective tool in insuring that text and images align. Break alignment only for emphasis and sparingly within a piece.

Margins

Avoid using the same margins on all sides of a publication. In facing-page documents, the inside margin should be smaller than the outside margins. The bottom margin is usually larger than any other margins.

In publications with facing pages, the outside margin of each page should be double the inside margin.

For best appearance, margins should be sized progressively from smallest to largest: inside, top, outside, bottom.

Rule of Thirds

Visually divide your page into thirds. Place elements on the page within these thirds for a more interesting and visually appealing layout.

Size

One measure of importance is size. Use larger graphics to communicate the most important goals of the piece. Smaller graphics are of lesser importance. When space is at a premium, drop the smaller elements first — they are less important.

Choosing typefaces

When in doubt, pair a serif font for body text and a sans serif font for headlines.

Avoid mixing two very similar typefaces, such as two scripts or two sans serifs. There is not enough contrast and the small differences will cause a visual clash.

Limit the number of different typefaces used in a single document to no more than three or four.

Avoid monospaced typefaces for body copy. They draw too much attention to the individual letters distracting the reader from the message.

Setting type

Avoid setting type in lines of more than sixty-five characters. Longer lines cause the reader to "double," or read the same line twice.

Avoid setting type in lines of less than thirty-five characters. Shorter lines cause sentences to be broken and hard to understand.

Apply the alphabet-and-a-half rule to your text. This would place ideal line length at 39 characters regardless of type size.

Apply the points-times-two rule to your text. Take the type size and multiply it by two. The result is your ideal line length in picas. That is, 12 point type would have an ideal line length of 12x2 or 24 picas (approx. 4 inches).

Avoid setting type in all capital letters. Capital letters slow reading speed and take 30 percent more space than lowercase letters.

Type size

For a predominantly older readership of 65 and over or for audiences with known visual handicaps, set body text in sizes from 14 to 18 points.

Use 11 to 12 point type for readers in the 40-65 age range.

For most general audiences, body copy set at 10 or 11 points is good.

For beginning readers of any age, a larger type size around 14 points is good.

Keep headlines between 14 and 30 points in most cases, keeping in mind that the closer in size to the body text, the harder it is to distinguish headlines from other text.

Initial Caps

Avoid placing initial caps in the lower one-third of the page.

Kerning

Round characters can be kerned more than straight characters.