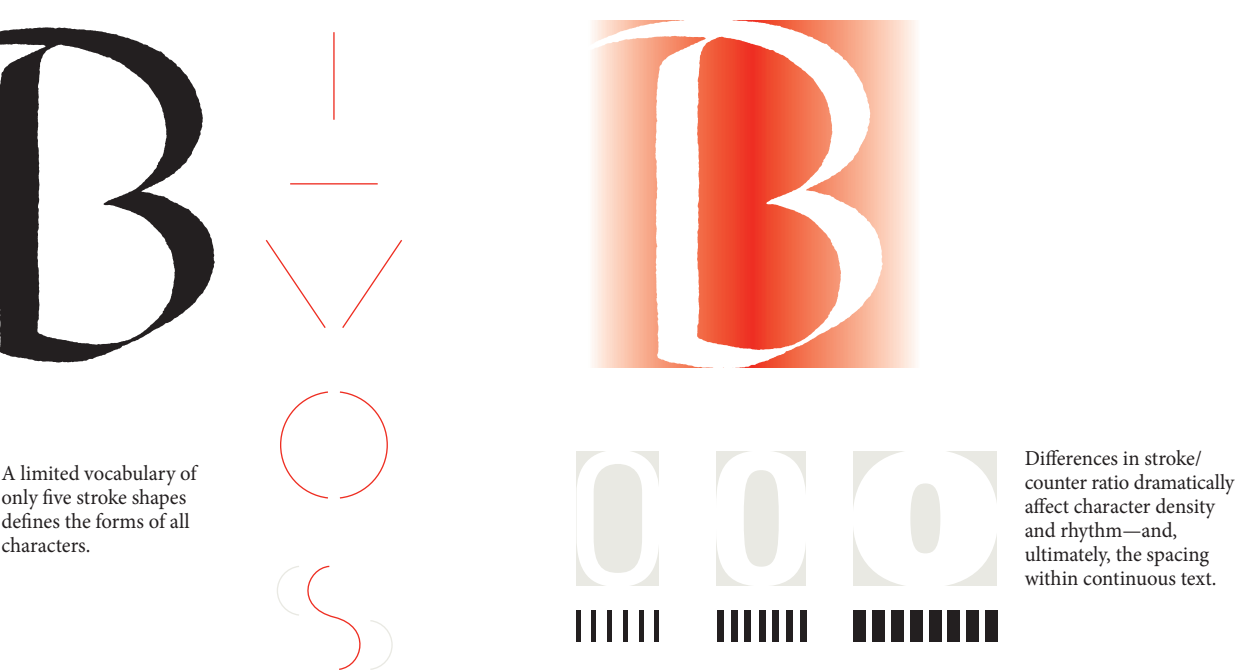# Type Basics
Letters

The fundamental building block of typography is the letter—an abstract sign composed of lines and shapes, as well as the spaces within and around them. Letters are part of a system, the alphabet, which also contains other signs: numbers, punctuation, and glyphs, or analphetic characters.

Stroke and Counter / The shape of a character or other letter is defined by lines, called strokes, each with a particular gestural movement, arranged in a specific combination: an H is made of two vertical strokes, joined by a horizontal stroke; a D consists, in essence, of a vertical and a curved stroke. Every stroke is itself a shape, consisting of a beginning, middle, and end.
—
Equally, or perhaps, more important for a character's definition are the spaces created between and around the strokes as they're formed: the negative areas or counterforms (typically called counters, for short). While strokes establish a character's shapes, counters define its overall proportion—width versus height—and, therefore, its density and rhythm: how much dark versus light it exhibits; how compressed or open it appears; and how much space will be appreciated as the eye traverses from left to right.
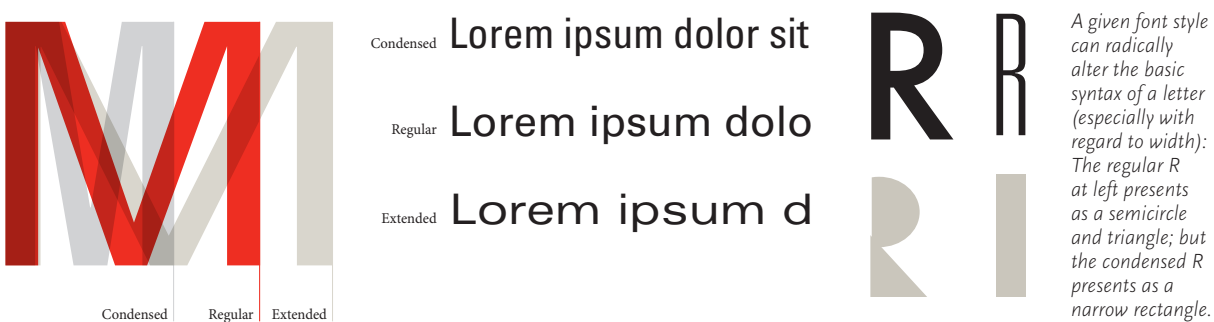

A limited vocabulary of only five stroke shapes defines the forms of all characters.

Differences in stroke/counter ratio dramatically affect character density and rhythm—and, ultimately, the spacing within continuous text.

Letterform Anatomy

Labels: Cap Height, Stem or Main Stroke, Serif, Aperture, Beak, Apex, Shoulder, Shoulder, Ascent Line, Cap Line, Mean Line, Spine, Counter, Waist, Baseline, Descent Line, Joint(s), Leg, Crossbar, Thin Stroke or Thin, Thick Stroke or Thick, Tail, Leg — F K S A Q R

Labels: x-Height, Camelback, Crotch, Ascent Line, Cap Line, Branch, Tittle, Ascender, Eye, Ear, Eye, Arc, Arm, Mean Line, Aperture, Tail, Baseline, Counter, Descender, Link, Return, Leg, Descent Line, Descender: Loop or Bowl — x n j h g e a k
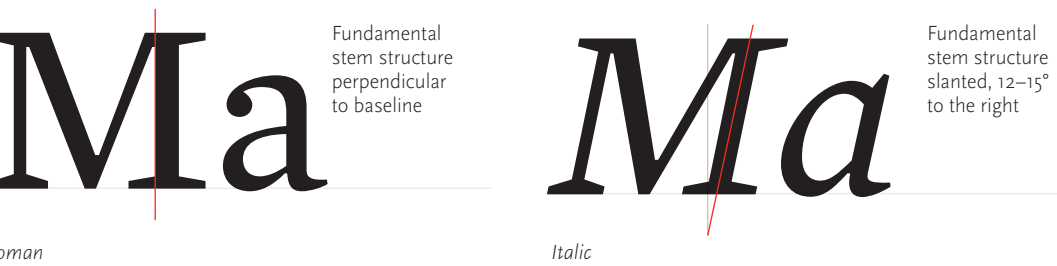

Weight / The relative thickness of a letter's strokes compared to its height (historically, the stroke weight of a regular- or medium-weight face is 1/7 of the cap height). The stroke weight may be the same throughout a letter, or it may change within a letter (having thin/thick contrast); the weight may also change within a single stroke (what is called modulation).

Light — Regular or Medium — Bold — Uniform Stroke Weight — Contrasting Stroke Weight (Thins+Thicks) — Modulated Stroke Weight

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Width / The characters of a specific face exhibit an overall width, relative to their height. This width may be regular—historically defined as a square of the height of the capital M—or, it may be narrower (*condensed*) or wider (*extended*) than that proportion. Contemporary faces are typically designed based on the M's width being about 80 to 90% of its height.

Condensed — Regular — Extended

Condensed Lorem ipsum dolor sit
Regular Lorem ipsum dolo
Extended Lorem ipsum d

A given font style can radically alter the basic syntax of a letter (especially with regard to width): The regular R at left presents as a semicircle and triangle; but the condensed R presents as a narrow rectangle.

Posture / A typeface may be structured such that the stems of its characters are perpendicular to the baseline (or of Roman posture); alternatively, the characters may slant to the right (Italic posture), usually at an angle of 10 to 15° off vertical. The characters of most italic serif faces are drawn with their own forms; sans serif italics are most often created by simply slanting the Romans, creating a posture called *oblique*.

Roman — Fundamental stem structure perpendicular to baseline

Italic — Fundamental stem structure slanted, 12–15° to the right

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Case / Most fonts are designed with two forms for each letter—a majuscule, capital, or uppercase form; and a miniscule or lowercase form. Sometimes, a font includes a set of small capitals (uppercase forms that are similar in height and weight to the lowercase); some fonts are designed as "unicase," mixing uppercase and lowercase structures within a single character set.

Uppercase or Capital [Majuscule] — Lowercase [Miniscule] — Small Capital (compared to capital and lowercase)

Character set / The term character set describes the selection of characters—and which kinds—that are included in a typeface's design.
—
The alphabetic characters are the 26 letters that each represent a single sound. The characters of the alphabet typically appear in two forms, or cases (see above). Many fonts (typefaces) also include a variety of special characters other than the letters themselves: Numerals, or numbers (including fractions), which sometimes also appear in two forms; punctuation, graphical marks that relate to grammar in writing; and glyphs (more accurately, analphabetic characters) that are usually symbolic (representing ideas such as currency, mathematical notations, and so on).

Alphabetic Characters (Including accented alternates)

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
ÀÁÂÃÄÅÆÇÇÐÈÉÊËÌÍÎÏŁÑÒÓÔÕÖØŒ
ŠÙÚÛÜÝŸŽ

Uppercase (or Capitals)

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
àáâãäåæçèéêëìíîïïðłñòóôõöøœùúûü
šýÿžſƒ   fififlffl

Lowercase — Ligatures

Numerals

0123456789 M   0123456789 M
Modern, or Lining, figures   Oldstyle, or Text, figures

¼ ½ ¾ ²/₅ ³/₅ ⁴/₅ ⅛ ³/₈ ⅝ ⅞
Fractions

Punctuation

.;:,!!??_--—()[]{}/|\''"",…˜´ˇ

Glyphs or Analphabetic Characters

& # $ ¢ £ ¥ € № % § ℗ * < > ¶ ≠ ±