

Type Basics

Sizing, Spacing, and Shaping

Font Sizes / The size of text is measured using the point system, developed in the 17th and 18th centuries. In most software programs, you can choose from a standard set of point sizes that range in specific increments from 6 points in size to 72 points in size—but you can also key in any point size in between these, larger or smaller, and in decimal increments (for example, you can set text at a size of 13.25 points, even though that measurement isn’t one of the options in the type size flyout menu).

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Ranges of typical point sizes are designated for certain uses (as a guide), whether for text (what is present for long-form reading, or the “main” content; larger, for display and expression; or smaller than text, or captions).

Much of typography has to do with how text is “set”, or styled, in terms of its size, spacing, and general shape as a cluster or block of lines. All of these aspects influence type on functional level (readability) as well as on a purely visual (syntactic) level (how the type looks).

Ma MaMa MaMa Ma

678

Caption sizes

Ma MaMa MaMa MaMa Ma

9101214

Text Sizes

Ma MaMa MaMa MaMa Ma

18243648

Ma MaMa Ma

6072

Display sizes

Note the disparity in size between sans-serif examples and serif examples of the same point size.

FixedFixed

The same word is set here two different faces, but both at 45 points in size. Because the sans-serif lowercase letters are larger in proportion to the caps (having a larger x-height), that text appears larger than does the serif text. Always evaluate the size of a text, set in the font you’ve decided to use, to determine whether it’s legible—don’t try to go by the point size itself.

Letterspacing / The spaces between letters, within words. Because all the letters have different shapes (and thus, different amounts of counterspace on either side), “even” spacing cannot be achieved by measuring—it must be done optically, by eye.

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Optimal (desirable) or “normal” spacing typically means that the spaces between letters appears to be about the same as the spaces inside letters—creating a consistent alternation between strokes and counters and, so, a uniform rhythm or texture that helps read seamlessly. Letterspacing may be tightened or loosened for different purposes; what is “optimal” may vary depending on the specific visual qualities of a given font. Spacing can also affect the way something is read or interpreted.

wordswordswords

wordswordswords

wordswordswords

Mathematically uniform spacing

Optically uniform spacing

Optimal, or “normal” spacing (top) versus tight spacing (bottom)

anxiousrelaxed

In addition to aiding legibility, how text is spaced will affect how the words are interpreted.

Wordspacing / The spaces between words. Within continuous text (sentences and paragraphs), the appearance of normal or even wordspacing can be achieved by inserting a lowercase letter “i” between the words and then removing it. In most cases, font and layout software will set text with normal wordspacing, but it’s always good to check.

onei hopesithei wordsiarei spacedievenly

one hopes the words are spaced evenly

Leading / The measurement between the baseline of one line of text and the baseline of the next line of text below it, measured in points. Usually, the point size and the leading assigned to a chunk of text is described as size/leading: for example, this text is 9 points in size, and the leading measure is 11 points, so it is 9/11.

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Visually, what is more important is the space between lines of text (whatever the leading measure happens to be): what is called the interline space. The interline space affects readability, and also affects the visual density (darkness) and texture of text.

Leading

Leading

INTERLINE SPACE

INTERLINE SPACE

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Alignment / How lines of text relate to each other within a group, as in a paragraph. Lines of text can line up with each other (or not) and the lines may be different lengths on the other side (or not).

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The visual “edge” created where lines of text line up is called the “flush”; the irregular shape on the other side, where the ends of the lines are shorter and longer, is called the “rag”. Text that is centered has a rag on both sides; text that is justified has a flush on both sides.

FLUSH

RAG

RAG

FLUSH

AXIS

JUSTIFIED

Good Rag / Creating “good,” or desirable, rags in asymmetrical text blocks (flush left or flush right) is an unavoidable headache. The goal is consistency in the rhythm of shorter and longer line lengths from the top of a paragraph to the bottom: an organic, unforced “ripple” or “fringe”, without pronounced indents or bulges, makes reading more fluid by minimizing distraction—the reader never becomes aware of lines ending at their natural conclusions. Overly active rags, therefore, are generally to be avoided.

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Example of a paragraph showing a desirable rag (left), and two paragraphs whose rags are fraught with problems: the rag is either too deep or active; shows sharp inclusions of negative space and protrusions of long lines; a contour with a noticeable shape; or irregular width overall from top to bottom.

Think of the blank page as alpine meadow, or as the purity of undifferentiated being. The typographer enters this space and must change it. The reader will enter it later, to see what the typographer has done. The underlying truth of the blank page must be infringed, but it must never altogether disappear—and whatever displaces it might well aim to be as lively and peaceful as it is. It is not enough, when building a title page, merely to unload some big, prefabricated letters into the center of the space, nor to dig a few holes in the silence with typographic heavy machinery and move on. Big type, even huge type, can be beautiful and useful.

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Good Justification / The specimen of justified text at near right exhibits all the hallmarks of exquisitely well-justified text: lines that are consistently spaced and that appear the same in overall density (none tighter and darker, nor looser and lighter); the word spaces are normal (not relatively tight or loose compared to the letterspacing for this type style); there are no rivers; and the presence of hyphens is minimal.

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The specimen of poorly justified text at far right displays wildly varied word spaces and rivers, lines whose density alternates between very dark and very light, and excessive hyphenation. To correct these problems, a designer must continually adjust text size and paragraph width, move text from line to line, and selectively tighten and loosen spacing. Short version: If you set justified text and it looks anything like the example above, it needs fixing.

An ancient metaphor: thought is a thread, and the raconteur is a spinner of yarns—but the true storyteller, the poet, is a weaver. The scribes made this old and audible abstraction into a new and visible fact. After long practice, their work took on such an even flexible texture that they called the written page a textus, which means cloth. The typesetting device, whether it happens to be a computer or a composing stick, functions like a loom. And the typographer, like the scribe, normally aims to weave the text as evenly as possible. Good letterforms are designed to give a lively, even texture, but careless spacing of letters, lines, and words can tear this fabric apart.

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