

Typography

For most of letterpress's history, printed matter was designed by the craftsmen producing the work, in particular the compositors. In the twentieth century design as a separate professional area became established, and the design of printing was gradually taken over by specialists known as typographers. Typography covers the choice of typefaces, and the layout of the printed page: the choice of margins, positioning of illustrations, colours of inks. (Graphic designers, who also work in printing, specialise in the production and use of illustrations, and designs with illustration as the essential element.) Nowadays (post-letterpress) of course, many pieces of printing do not involve a compositor at all, as they are "set" by the author, and the text then merely manipulated without re-setting by the designer.

When compositors were the designers, most design followed conventions, and any training that was given was usually by example. While this kept designs functional, and avoided excesses of fashion, it also made most of them mediocre and all of them unadventurous. Only the rare craftsman had the gift of going beyond the usual, and even then was likely to be met with disapproval from a very conservative industry, an attitude that merely reflected that of society as a whole at the time. In most artistic activities, this would be a major hindrance, but by its nature, the design of printing should be unobtrusive. Advertising material of course intends to catch attention, but in most printed matter it is the content and legibility that matters, and lettering or layouts

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Even spacing between letters is important for legibility, and certain letter combinations are awkward in letterpress, where the characters are on solid pieces of metal. Letter f in most designs overhangs ('kerns') on the right, to fit tightly, but if next to f, i or l has to be spaced to avoid colliding and leaves a large gap. To avoid this, most typefaces routinely provided the extra combined characters ('ligatures') above, and occasionally a few others. Interestingly, computers, where such extra characters would be fairly easy to provide, don't supply them all except in professional software.

that distract the eye or the reader by being obtrusive (for example, by being unusual) are failing in their main function. The rise of the typographer, and the move away from strict conventions came alongside the growth of advertising as a major form of printed production.

Even in advertising, much of the design has to be unobtrusive to function: only certain parts are intended to be eye-catching, and the others must be subordinated to enhance this effect, and much of typography is about the achievement of this subordination, and making text clear and yet subtly enhancing its message with artistic choices. The flashier bits of typography that the public notice—such as eccentric letter styles—are not at all typical of the real hard work that forms the bulk of the work.

Choosing a particular typeface for a piece of work involves many aspects, with legibility being usually the most important. This in itself is not a simple issue, for research has revealed that it is not

just a matter of size or clear letter-shapes, but also of reader familiarity, the psychology of word-recognition, and other complex issues. It therefore changes according to circumstances, and the choice becomes as much a matter of intuition as of artistry, science, or personal preference. This is why there are so many different typefaces, with variations so slight that the average reader is unaware of their existence. If you look at the other posters in this series, you will see that different typefaces have been used, not just for the more noticeable headlines, but also for the text, and that the results are different in texture and feeling. Some are consciously archaic, some bland, some striking: the effect will vary to some extent from reader to reader according to their past experiences and preferences. Some typefaces are based on designs that have been in use for hundreds of years, and many are re-workings, often several times over, of such old styles, in an attempt to refine the best aspects of well-tried forms.

After choosing the main typeface, its size and line-spacing may come the choice of other faces to use alongside for headlines or other requirements—to differentiate sections of text, highlight items, etc—and the use of colours, margins, blank spaces, illustrations, and even paper textures. As with most artistic choices, these can work by contrast or by coordination, and on the whole the most successful designs work by restraint, using a few simple choices to maximum effect, rather than an over-indulgence on variety. While computer typesetting allows for great freedom and almost limitless exotic effects, most printing still uses the same simple rules that letterpress by its nature imposed on layouts, such as straight lines of black-on-white text, and for good reasons of practicality for the ultimate user, the reader.