

legibility legibility

Here's another fundamental aspect of typography. Unlike readability, though, which is a characteristic of text, legibility refers to the clarity of single characters. While the two are distinct, they are related and should be considered together when you're selecting typefaces for particular applications. (You might say legibility describes a font and readability its function.)

WEIGHT

Typefaces of medium weight are most readable. A typeface that is too light cannot be easily distinguished from the background, and a typeface that is too bold could lose the counterform (negative space that is fully or partially enclosed by a letterform) which is essential to good legibility.

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Legibility is reduced in fonts which have extremely thick and thin strokes. That's because thin strokes are less visible and counterforms are decreased by the thick strokes. Fonts with greatly contrasting strokes will also, when used in long passages of text, create a sparkle or dazzle effect that makes reading difficult.

SERIF VS SAN SERIF

Serif type, because of its horizontal flow, is often more readable, especially in long passages of text. But did you know that most studies find little difference in legibility between serif and san serif typefaces? When you're selecting typefaces, take into account not only their legibility and how readable they will be in your specific application, but also the reading audience and your document's graphic distinction.

TYPE SIZE

Text type that is too small or too large makes reading difficult. That's because small type reduces visibility and large type forces the reader to look at type in sections rather than as a whole. It's usually best to set text type in the range 9 to 12 point.

SHAPES OF LETTERS

Based on their dominant strokes, the 26 letters of the alphabet can be divided into four groups: vertical, curved, a combination of vertical and curved, and oblique. As you can see, letters within each group have similar characteristics and are more likely to be confused with each other.

Notice how the upper halves of letters are more differentiable and therefore more recognizable than the lower halves? And the right halves more so than the left halves? Letters with ascenders and descenders help word recognition. The most frequently used letters, such as the vowels a e i o u, are among the most indistinguishable. Other letters that often cause confusion and are mistaken for one another are *fijll*.

SHAPES OF WORDS

Words are recognized by their shapes, rather than by the individual letters that make them up. The shape of a word is formed by a combination of the external contour of its letters and its internal word pattern (the counterforms of letters). That's why words set in lowercase letters are easier to recognize than words set in all caps. The irregular word shapes formed by lowercase letters make them more recognizable.

TYPE IS TO READ
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il
acegos
bdfhjmnprt
kvwxyz

EFHILT
COQS
BDGJPRU
AKMNVWXYZ

legibility
legibility

legibility
legibility

acdekqrstu

JUSTIFIED VS UNJUSTIFIED

Type that is set flush left, ragged right often has more even spacing throughout. Because the type is aligned on the left, and because each line at the right is either long or shorter than the next, readers can easily locate the beginning of a new line.

Take care not to rag the type too much when you set ragged right text. The extreme ragged edge creates uncomfortable rhythm and calls attention to the shape of the column. A "soft" ragged right should look like a piece of paper loosely torn from top to bottom.

When you justify a column of type, make sure the additional spaces between letters and words don't create awkward gaps or "rivers." This can be disruptive to comfortable reading but is difficult to avoid when the column width is narrow.

Although visually interesting, lengthy text set flush right, ragged left is hard to read because the reader must pause a moment to pinpoint the beginning of each line.

COLUMN

Lengthy columns are easier to read if they are kept to a short line measure like this. For greater readability in long columns, use a typeface with a smaller x-height. Refer to the package listings for Adobe typefaces that will improve legibility in long columns such as those found in the Adobe Font Bundles.

Another thing to consider is the x-height of the typeface you're using, especially if space is limited. Typefaces set in the same size may look larger or smaller depending on their x-heights. So typefaces with larger heights can be set at smaller sizes, usually without sacrificing readability.

"Thought-unit" composition is an uncommon style of typography that is set ragged right and broken for sense and emphasis. Lines of any length are set with breaks determined by the author's intended thoughts rather than by the column width.