

Legibility and Readability

(Refer to *Emigré* number 15, especially page 5.)

Legibility is a graphic quality that refers to the ease of seeing and recognizing letterforms. Legibility refers to...

- the clarity of individual characters, and how quickly they are deciphered
- the design of the type, including shape, weight and relative size of the letters

The primary purpose of a letterform is to convey a recognizable meaning to the mind. Legibility is dependent upon...

- knowledge of the history of type
- communication context
- subtle adjustment of letterforms
- (degrees of) contrast, simplicity and proportion of letterforms
- interletter and interword spacing

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In designing typefaces, sufficient care must be taken to insure that enough contrast exists between letters so they may easily be distinguishable... It is the contrast among individual characters that makes it possible for the reader to decipher written information. Confusion may result if a reader sees a letter whose shape is noticeably different than the originally learned shape (*Emigré* number 15, especially page 5).

The upper half of letters provides more visual cues for letter recognition than the lower half; the right half more than the left. Ascenders and/or descenders also aid in letter recognition (refer to handout, *Legibility*).

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Letter perception is based on the relationship between *form* and *counterform* (counterform is the negative space shaped by letterforms; this includes the interior counters and space between characters)

There have been studies done on the legibility of serif versus sans-serif type. Some argue that serifs reinforce the horizontal flow of each line, and that serifs offer greater character definition. Others disagree.

Letters are grouped together to form words, and—in the majority of cases—it is the groups of words that are read rather than the individual letters.

Readability has two meanings (for the purposes of this course, we are concerned with meaning #1):

- 1 typographically designing the page, so that it is visually inviting to read
- 2 in mass media, a style of writing with short words in simple sentences, thus making the text inviting to read (A digression, but a worthy one, by Winston Churchill: “*Short words are best... and the old words when short, are best of all.*”)

Readability refers to...

- the level of comfort when reading printed material
- the *arrangement* of type on the page

Readability is affected by...

- line length
- word spacing
- letterspacing
- leading
- word shape
- internal pattern
- familiarity

legibility and readability are both seriously diminished when type is set entirely in maguscules. The straight horizontal alignment of the upper-case letters provides no visual cues because of its extreme regularity. When type is set in upper- and lower-case, words are more easily distinguished because of the contrast of the irregular shapes which provide for the reader the recognition of an internal pattern:

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letter combinations with which we have become familiar are perceived to have meaning, whereas letter combinations with which we have not become familiar are perceived to not have meaning:

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- Type’s texture and tone are affected by letter, word and line spacing. Consistent texture and spatial intervals ensure easily readable text. Too much or too little interletter or interword spacing threatens the texture intended by the typeface designer. As a rule of thumb, spacing between letters and words should be proportional to the width of the letters. Too little space? The letters ‘visually’ merge. Too much? The reader sees the letters as individual units rather than grouped together as words.