

## Syntax and Communication

(Semiotics = 'of signs')

*Syntax* is the arrangement of typographic elements into a cohesive whole.

To study typographic syntax, begin with type's basic unit, the *letter*; progress to the *word*, the *line of type* and to the *column of type*.

Consider the design-related psychology of perception known as *Gestalt*. Gestalt psychologists explain perception as the organization of sensory data into whole units or objects. The term *Gestalt* is translated from German to mean, 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.' The unified whole is perceived by the viewer, rather than the many elements that may be present in making up the whole.

Our ability to gather and group visual patterns permits us to visually accept a printed page as a total unit... this brings us back to typographic syntax, or arranging typographic elements to form a cohesive whole.

### 'Building' the Typographic Page

The *letter*.

- The well-drawn and precise letterform distinguishes one family of type from another.
- A letterform may exist in a variety of weights, shapes and sizes.
- Letterform combinations may act as signs or symbols (glyphs).
- Visual interplay between letters provides balance and interest to a page.
- Repetition, the relationship of the letterform to the white, or negative, space, size of the letterform and placement upon the page combine to create the visual Gestalt.

The *word*.

- Specific combinations of letterforms may form words.
- The word suggests union of letterforms; it signifies a cohesive whole.
- When words are used as a strong visual element, the designer must be attentive to the interior rhythms of the words. Elements of contrast may occur among the shapes of the letterforms. Repetition and progression may combine to form a visual balance. Keep this in mind especially when designing logotypes or when letters or words are large or prominent upon a page such as to visually attract individual attention to them.
- The designer works to make the interletter space (the space between each pair of letters) *appear* equal to the space between every other pair of letters. This spacing—called  *Kerning*—produces an *optical balance* rather than a rigid mechanical measurement.

The *line of type*.

- Words are joined together to create a line of type. Configuration and placement of lines of type are significant *structural* concerns. A line of type usually is set in a single point size, in a single weight, extended over a specific width (usually horizontal).
- Lines of type may be arranged symmetrically or asymmetrically. The designer must establish a clear relationship between the type and the surrounding white space. Visual order and clarity must occur to *facilitate communication*.
- The designer must consider overall effect. Selection of type—size, weight, width and typeface—must be integrated with alignment, placement and spacing. Interrelationships between words and between the letterforms that make up the words must be considered.

The *column of text*.

- The visual qualities of a column of text include contrast, depth-to-width ratio, texture (the tactile appearance of the type) and tone (color).\*
- Movement may be emphasized, i.e. horizontal, vertical, diagonal.
- Information can be grouped and organized into a hierarchy. The designer may guide the reader's eye and suggest elements of dominance or subordination.

#### \* Note

Sometimes the term, 'color,' is used to mean the texture of the type and when used in this context it has nothing to do with the actual *color* of the text, but with the value changes that build up by varying type size, weight, placement, etc....