

Typography in Newsletters

A Slide Presentation by Nancy A. Pickering, Pen and Brush Communications



This is a slide presentation I created for my chapter of Business Network International in 2009. "Pen and Brush Communications" is the name of my Graphic Design business.

Nancy A. Pickering

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Writers will tell you, “Content is King.” They mean the words are more important than bright colors or fancy graphics on the page. But that is true only so long as the words themselves are easy to read. I don’t mean word choice – such as using “use” instead of “utilize” to simplify your words – I mean the appearance of the words on a page, and the shape of the letters that form those words. I mean *typography*.

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Definitions by Example

Font: Example:

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz0123456789

./?<>,:;"'[]\|@#\$\$%^&*()_+

(all specifically in Times New Roman "regular" 12 pt.)

Typeface or Font Family:

Example: All of the above in Arial regular, Arial Bold, Arial Italic, Arial Narrow, Arial Condensed, Arial Black, and at all type sizes, such as 8, 10, 12, 14, 18 points.

Definitions (as seen on the slide):

Font:

Example: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZabcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz0123456789./?<>,:;"'[]\|@#\$\$%^&*()_+ (all shown are specifically in Times New Roman "regular" 12 pt.)

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Monospaced/Proportional

Monospaced Fonts, 12 pt.	Horizontal width demo
Courier New	The quick brown fox
Letter Gothic	The quick brown fox
ØCR A Extended	The quick brown fox

Proportional Fonts, 12 pt.	Horizontal width demo
Times New Roman	The quick brown fox
Arial	The quick brown fox

Let's look at some other terminology:

“Monospaced” vs. “Proportional” fonts. In other words, does each letter take the same width of space? Does the small case “i” take as much space as a Capital “W”? If so, the font is monospaced. If the width is adjusted for each letter, it is a proportional font.

This slide shows a comparison by showing the amount of horizontal width. Different monospaced fonts at the same point size still take the same amount of horizontal space. But different proportional fonts at the same point size take differing amounts of horizontal space.

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Serif/Sans Serif

Serif Fonts, 12 pt.	Horizontal width demo
Times New Roman	The quick brown fox
Book Antigua	The quick brown fox
Century Schoolbook	The quick brown fox
Garamond	The quick brown fox
Georgia (web)	The quick brown fox

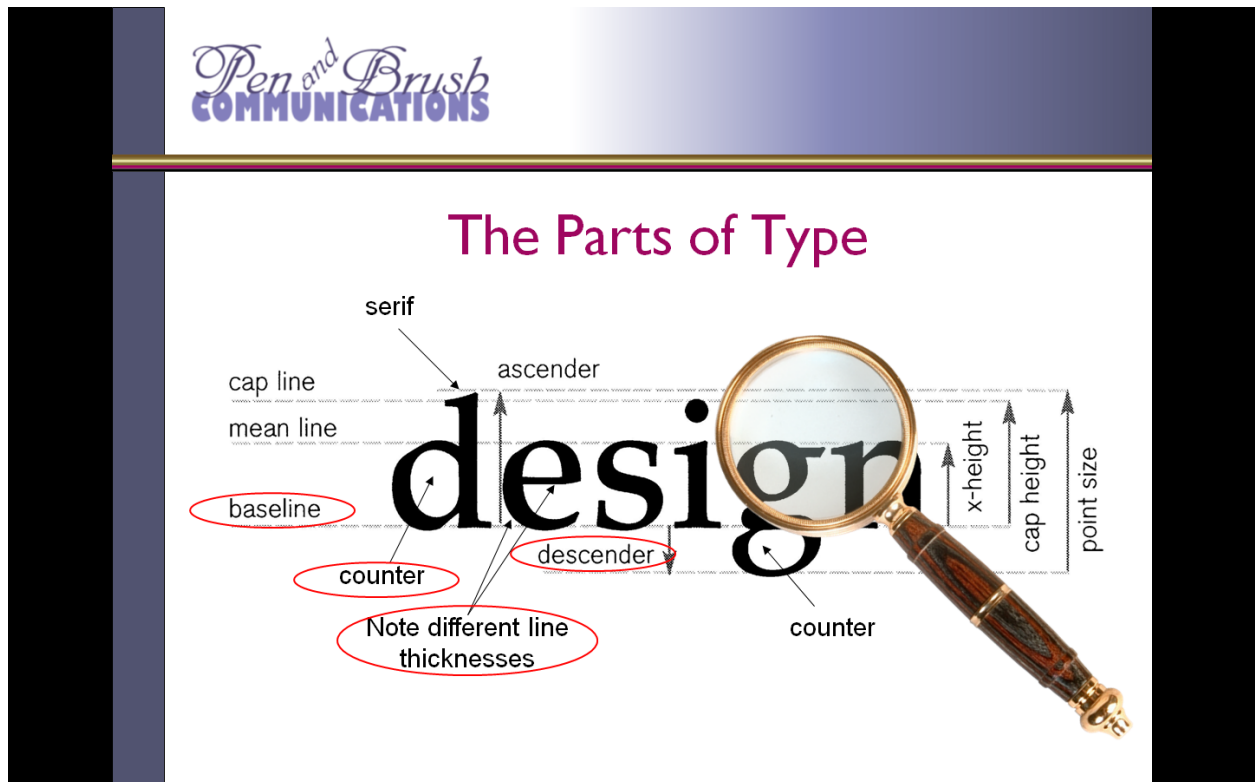
Sans-Serif Fonts, 12 pt.	Horizontal width demo
Arial	The quick brown fox
Helvetica	The quick brown fox
Futura	The quick brown fox
Franklin Gothic Book	The quick brown fox
Verdana (web)	The quick brown fox

Serif fonts have those little end-stroke lines that help draw the eye along, while “sans-serif” is French for “without” serif strokes.

By the way, all these shown are proportional fonts. They’re also among the most popular for easy readability.

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These are the parts of type:

Baseline, the imaginary line upon which the letters rest

X-height, extending from the baseline to the top of e, n, and other small-case letters

Ascenders and descenders are upward or downward strokes of some letters. The small case "d" has an ascender, and the small case "g" has a descender.

A **Counter** is an enclosed portion, like an "e" or "a" or "o" -- or on this slide, a "d" or "g"

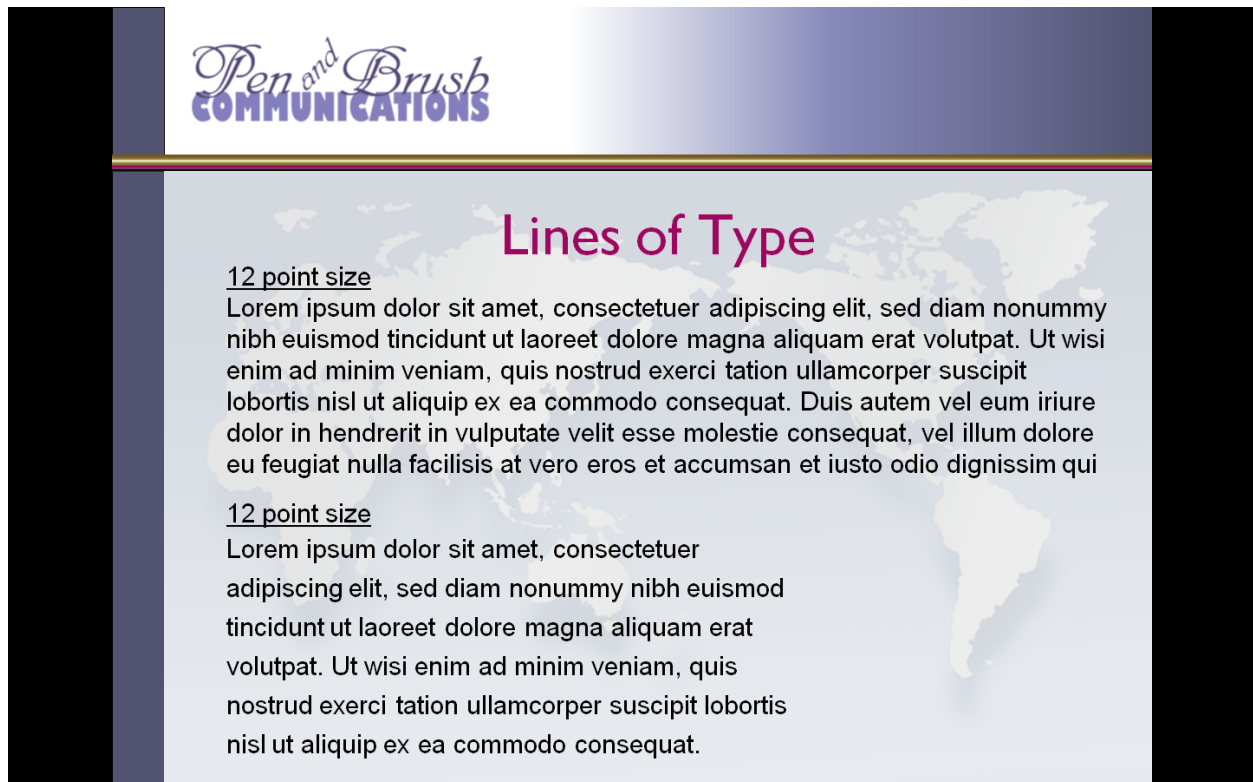
Note that these proportions, both vertical and horizontal, vary from typeface to typeface.

And that there are many styles of serifs (straight, curved), with many line thickness styles, too.

Point size is determined by the highest ascender and lowest descender. That means a 12-pt font in one face may look larger or smaller than a different 12-pt font from a different face. And, just so you know, there are 72 points to an inch. So, 36-point type is ½" high.

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This text is from a Latin speech by Cicero in 45 BC, and has been used by typesetters to mock up layouts since the first printing press.

I'm using it to illustrate the importance of line length. Because Typography isn't just about the lettering from an alphabet, it's about putting those letters into meaningful lines and sentences and making the result easy to read.

Some things to notice here:

1. The text is shown at different line lengths, to show that pages that are too wide tire the eyes and make it difficult to follow from the end of one line to the start of the next without getting "lost." Experts say the best line lengths are no wider than 60 characters and no narrower than 20 characters, although that refers to monospaced fonts.
2. Also notice the line heights – or the vertical space between one line of text and the next line above or below it. This is called "leading" (pronounced "ledding") from the good old days of lines of metal type made from lead on an old-fashioned printing press. There were "blank lines" of lead placed between the horizontal rows of letters. The second example has increased leading. Notice how less "dark" the block of text looks?
3. Notice that this isn't "justified" text, where all the line lengths are exactly the same length, creating a vertical line on the margin. A "ragged-right" edge is actually easier to read!
4. Also notice that this is dark type on a light background, creating a high contrast – another key to readability. It would be even better if there weren't a map behind it, especially so if it were on the web. Very light solid colors are usually much better for backgrounds, especially white.

If you must use a lighter type color against a dark background, don't do it for a full page of body text. It'll tire the eyes. Save that special effect for short headlines or specialty applications. My new business cards will have white text on a solid colored background on the back – but the text is a list, and the type is in a bold font, all to create enough contrast.

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The slide features the logo for Pen and Brush Communications in the top left corner. The main title is 'Readability Studies' in a large, bold, purple font. Below the title, there are two columns of text. The left column is titled 'Winning Characteristics:' and lists three items: 'Readability in Layout', 'Eye Flow & Examples', and 'Emotional Connection'. The right column is titled 'Effective Combination of:' and lists four items: 'Typeface Choice', 'Type Size', 'Line Spacing (Leading)', and 'Line Length'. A hand is shown pointing upwards towards the text in the right column. The slide has a dark blue header and footer, and a white main content area.

Good typography can actually send a subtle message beyond the meaning of the words themselves. Winning typography has at least these 3 characteristics:

1. Readability, including layout.
2. Eye flow – providing a distinct path for your eye to follow (very important if your page has many elements competing for attention, such as for a newsletter). We tend to read (in Western culture) from **left to right, top to bottom, dark to light, and big to small**.
3. Emotional connection – which can help make a good first impression. For example, you can project an atmosphere of conservative, or elegant, or casual, or friendly, just by the typeface you choose.

And these 3 characteristics are achieved by the effective use of the following 4 factors:

- Choice of typeface (Arial? Times New Roman?)
- Type size (10, 11, 12 points?)
- Line spacing or “leading,” which is rarely kept at default settings. So you must decide: Single or double spaced? Open or tight? The previous page showed an open example at the bottom of the slide.
- Line length (how many characters in the line?)

(These last 3 always work together. Once you’ve decided on a typeface, you should never consider type size without also considering line spacing and line length at the same time.)

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Readability Studies Statistics

- ∞ Serif fonts for print =5x easier
 - Garamond vs. Helvetica
- ∞ Body text best at 10-12 pts.
- ∞ Don't overuse bold.
- ∞ Headline placement top left.
- ∞ Headings/Subheads for attention.



I've got some Readability Studies Statistics for you:

These results, even if they are 25 years old, still resonate.

(I should also make the disclaimer that the results apply to print media, not online media):

1. Tests show that more than 5 times as many readers are likely to read and understand text when a serif typeface is used instead of a sans-serif typeface. That means reading body text set in sans-serif type was difficult to read – at least in print. However, results aren't as clear-cut on the web.
As an example, 67% of readers agree that Garamond (a serif font) is much easier to comprehend than Helvetica (a sans-serif font). If you set the type in Helvetica, only 12% of your readers will thoroughly understand the message, while **65% have a hard time understanding letters set in sans-serif body type**. This means that if you DO set your body text in sans-serif, 5 times as many readers are **less** likely to fully understand your message.
2. A nine-year study from 1982-1990 that examined several elements of typographic design showed that 75% of readers prefer type set between 10 and 12 points. Don't go for 8 points – in most cases, it's too small. Ditto for 14 points; it's too large.
3. Research shows that fewer than half of your readers will easily understand your piece's message if the whole thing is set in a **bold** font.
4. Studies prove that for a layout to be its most effective, the headline (or other important information) must appear near the top left corner of the page. If the headline appears anywhere else on the page – center or bottom, you will lose more than 50% of your readers. And if you *don't* place the *next* line in a position for natural eye movement, that action may cost you as much as 38% of your readers.
5. Make heads & subheads big enough to attract attention. They are often simply bolded body text, and that's often too small and doesn't grab attention very well. This is one place where large, bold, contrast-color sans-serif fonts work very well.

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A Few Don'ts

- Don't cram a page with dense text
- Don't use complex typefaces
- Don't overuse patterns and big bold letters or you'll confuse or fatigue your reader
- Don't use wildly varying line lengths, but don't use fully justified text, either -- DO use ragged-right alignment

To Sum Up: At the very least, set your body type in a serif typeface, dark type on a white or light background, and use high-contrast sans-serif for headlines and subheads.

Let's end with a few "DONT'S"

- Don't cram a page with dense text **
- Don't use complex typefaces, at least not for newsletters.
- Don't overuse patterns and big bold letters or you'll confuse or fatigue your reader
- Don't use wildly varying line lengths, but don't use fully justified text, either -- DO use ragged-right alignment

To Sum Up: Set your body type in a serif typeface, dark type on a white or light background, and use high-contrast sans-serif for headlines and subheads. Put the most important information at the top, remembering that Top Left is the strongest position on the page.

Second-best font combination, especially for the web, is body type in a readable sans-serif, with a high-contrast serif for headlines and subheads.

**Not discussed in this slide presentation are all the little "cheats" that many designers know about. These are used when a newsletter article barely won't fit into the allocated space. How do you make it fit? Adjustments to line heights, font size (even by half a point!), word and letter spacing/kerning, and the like are often employed for this—but that's a different subject, as the specific tricks depend a great deal on the software you're using. If you're interested in these topics, your software User Manual or topics on the internet can fill you in.