

Type Talk

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With a plethora of fonts at our fingertips, it's easy to forget that typography's really a fine art. A type designer hand-crafts each letter to shine on its own in large display type

or to blend harmoniously in smaller body type. Here's the skinny on what's in a typeface so you can get the most out of your type design—or at least sound smart at a cocktail party.

Fonts Versus Typefaces

Most people confuse these two terms. A *font* is a set of characters in a particular weight and style. A *typeface* is a family of fonts. For example, Helvetica Condensed Bold is a particular font within the Helvetica typeface.

Ascender

The portion of a character that rises above the x-height is the *ascender*.

X-Height

The *x-height* is the distance between the baseline and the mean line in a letter—in other words, the height of the lowercase letter x. X-heights vary from one typeface to another. As a general rule, typefaces with larger x-heights are easier to read at small sizes.

Cap Height

The *cap height* is the height of a capital letter in a given font.

Barney the

Mean Line

The *mean line* marks the height of all lowercase letters.

Leading

The space (measured in points) from baseline to baseline between lines of type is called the leading. The leading for the word "barfly" is 95 points.

Barfly

Descender

The portion of a character that dips below the baseline is the *descender*.

Baseline

The *baseline* is the invisible line on which type rests.

Ligatures

In the days of letterpress printing, when letters were cast on individual pieces of metal for typesetting, certain letter pairs—such as fl, ff, fi—couldn't be kerned closely enough on two separate pieces of metal, so they were designed as one character on a single piece of metal. These combined characters are *ligatures*. Today, only professional-level fonts include all the ligatures for a certain typeface. However, the keyboard combinations Shift-Option-5 and Shift-Option-6 yield fi and fl, accordingly.

Point Size

Font sizes are measured in *points*. A single point is about 1/72nd of an inch. The font you're reading now is 8-point Swiss721 Condensed. The words "Barney" and "the" are in 55-point Helvetica Condensed, while the word "Barfly" is in 118-point Caslon Regular.

Kerning Versus Tracking

Kerning changes the space between two individual letters. Particularly when you're dealing with large type sizes, the spacing between letters can look uneven. You can adjust this with kerning, but take care not to overdo it—you'll end up with uncomfortably tight spacing or character groupings that don't seem natural to the eye. *Tracking* alters the space between letters in a larger string of text, such as a paragraph. Don't overtrack or the words will look cramped or spaced out and will tire readers' eyes.

Sans Serif

Fonts like Helvetica and Arial have no serifs, so they're called *sans serif* fonts. These are often used for display type, such as titles and headlines.



Serif

Serifs are the hats, or strokes, that adorn the tips of letters. Serifs are useful for setting large amounts of small text (as in a book or magazine article) because they guide the reader's eye from word to word. Times New Roman is a typical serif font, commonly used in newspapers.

