

Fonts: How to Choose Between Them

By Tim North

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FONTS: HOW TO CHOOSE BETWEEN THEM

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Choosing a font is something that most of us give little thought to. After all, most fonts are more or less the same, right? Let's face it, most writing is presented in a stock-standard font like Times New Roman or Arial.

Why is the choice of font important?

There are many differences between fonts: some obvious, some subtle. As well as setting the mood of what we write, these differences can have significant effects on legibility.

In this article, we'll classify fonts in several different ways and compare the effects that these have on legibility. Let's start by comparing serif and sans-serif fonts.

Serif versus sans-serif fonts

Start up a word processor and type a letter "h". Change it to a large size (say 72 points) and use Times or Times New Roman as your font. Notice the three small cross strokes at the ends of

the strokes. These are called serif. Fonts that provide these are said to be serif fonts. Fonts that do not are sans-serif fonts. ("Sans" is the French word for without.)

Now change the font to Arial, Helvetica or Verdana. These are all sans-serif fonts. Notice that the three small cross strokes have disappeared.

Serif fonts, all things being equal, are easier to read.

This is because the serif makes the individual letters more distinctive and thus easier for our brains to recognise quickly. Without the serif, the brain has to spend longer identifying a letter because its shape is less distinct.

An important proviso must be made, however. On the low resolution of a computer screen, very small serif text (say 9 points or less) might actually be harder to read than corresponding sans serif because the more complex shapes of serif characters cannot be accurately drawn in sizes this small.

Deciding whether to use a serif or sans serif font is still a personal choice, however, and no hard-and-fast rules apply. Even though serif fonts are usually easier to read, you might prefer a sans-serif font for a particular document if you feel that it sets an appropriate mood. Sans-serif fonts are often thought to look more modern.

A commonly followed convention, though, is to use a serif font for the body text of your document and a sans-serif font for the headings. My recommended fonts for general work are Georgia (a very lovely serif font) and Verdana, a very legible sans-serif. Verdana is probably already installed on your computer.

Both of these fonts (together with a number of others) are freely available from Microsoft's Web site:

<http://www.microsoft.com/typography/fontpack/default.htm>

Fixed-width and variable-width fonts

In some fonts, every character is the same width; in others, the characters are of different widths. Not surprisingly, these fonts are termed fixed width and variable width respectively.

Start up your word processor. Type half a dozen lower-case "l"s and then on the next line type half a dozen lower-case "w"s. In most fonts the "w"s will be much wider. (Such fonts are variable width.)

Now select the two lines of characters and set the font to Courier or Courier New. Notice that both lines are now the same

length. Courier is a fixed-width font.

It should be no surprise that variable-width fonts look more natural and are thus easier to read. Fixed-width fonts such as Courier have quite limited application:

- * Computer programmers use fixed-width fonts in order to neatly align their code.
- * The other main use of fixed-width fonts is to produce tables that need to be neatly tabulated into fixed-width columns.

Conclusion

As an exercise go through the fonts on your computer and find five variable-width, serif fonts that you like the look of. Choose among these for the body copy of your documents.

Now find five variable-width, sans-serif fonts. Use these for your headings, captions, headers and footers.

Armed with these simple ways of classifying fonts, you should now have an easy time of choosing suitable fonts for all occasions.

You'll find over 200 tips like this in Tim North's new e-book BETTER WRITING SKILLS. It's just \$19.95 and comes with a 90-day, money-back guarantee. Download a FREE CHAPTER now.
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