

Categories of type

There are many thousands of different typefaces available right now, and many more being created every day. Most faces, though, can be dropped into one of the six categories mentioned below. Before you try to become conscious of the *contrasts* in type, you should become aware of the *similarities* between broad groups of type designs, because it is the *similarities* that cause the conflicts in type combinations. The purpose of this chapter is to make you more aware of the details of letterforms. In the next chapter I'll launch into combining them.

Of course, you will find hundreds of faces that don't fit neatly into any category. We could make several hundred different categories for the varieties in type—don't worry about it. The point is just to start looking at type more closely and clearly.

I focus on these six groups:

Oldstyle

Modern

Slab serif

Sans serif

Script

Decorative

Oldstyle

Typefaces created in the **oldstyle** category are based on the handlettering of scribes—you can imagine a wedge-tipped pen held in the hand. Oldstyles always have serifs (see the call-out below) and the serifs of lowercase letters are always at an angle (the angle of the pen). Because of that pen, all the curved strokes in the letterforms have a transition from thick to thin, technically called the “thick/thin transition.” This contrast in the stroke is relatively moderate, meaning it goes from kind-of-thin to kind-of-thicker. If you draw a line through the thinnest parts of the curved strokes, the line is diagonal. This is called the *stress*—oldstyle type has a diagonal stress.



Goudy Palatino Times

Baskerville Garamond

Do these faces all look pretty much the same to you? Don't worry—they look the same to everyone who hasn't studied typography. Their “invisibility” is exactly what makes oldstyles the best type group for extensive amounts of body copy. There are rarely any distinguishing characteristics that get in the way of reading; they don't call attention to themselves. If you're setting lots of type that you want people to actually read, choose an oldstyle.

Modern

As history marched on, the structure of type changed. Type has trends and succumbs to lifestyle and cultural changes, just like hairdos, clothes, architecture, or language. In the 1700s, smoother paper, more sophisticated printing techniques, and a general increase in mechanical devices led to type becoming more mechanical also. New typefaces no longer followed the pen in hand. Modern typefaces have serifs, but the serifs are now horizontal instead of slanted, and they are very thin. Like a steel bridge, the structure is severe, with a radical thick/thin transition, or contrast, in the strokes. There is no evidence of the slant of the pen; the stress is perfectly vertical. Moderns tend to have a cold, elegant look.



Bodoni Times Bold Onyx

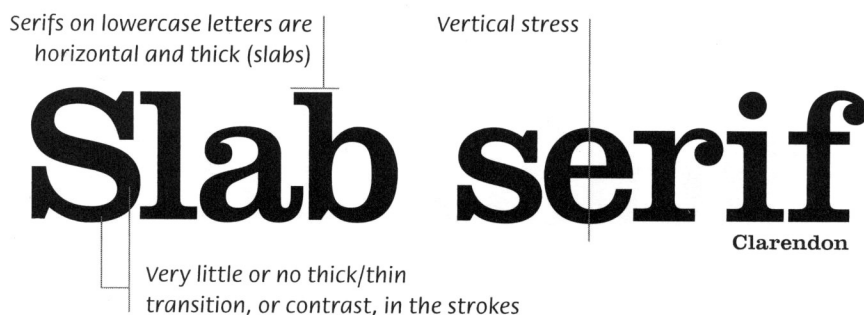
Fenice, Ultra Walbaum

Modern typefaces have a striking appearance, especially when set very large. Because of their strong thick/thin transitions, most moderns are not good choices for extended amounts of body copy. The thin lines almost disappear, the thick lines are prominent, and the effect on the page is called “dazzling.”

Slab serif

Along with the industrial revolution came a new concept: advertising. At first, advertisers took modern typefaces and made the thicks thicker. You've seen posters with type like that—from a distance, all you see are vertical lines, like a fence. The obvious solution to this problem was to thicken the entire letterform. Slab serifs have little or no thick/thin transition.

This category of type is sometimes called Clarendon, because the typeface Clarendon (shown below) is the epitome of this style. They are also called Egyptian because they became popular during the Egyptomania phase of Western civilization; many typefaces in this category were given Egyptian names so they would sell (Memphis, Cairo, Scarab).



Clarendon **Memphis**

Memphis Extra Bold

New Century Schoolbook

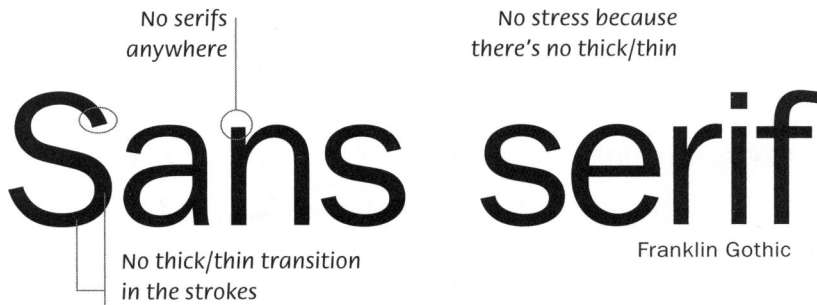
Many of the slab serifs that have a slight thick/thin contrast (such as Clarendon or New Century Schoolbook) are very high on the readability scale, meaning they can easily be used in extensive text. They present an overall darker page than oldstyles, though, because their strokes are thicker and relatively monoweight. Slab serifs are often used in children's books because of their clean, straightforward look.

Sans serif

The word “sans” means “without” (in French), so sans serif typefaces are those without serifs on the ends of the strokes. The idea of removing the serifs was a rather late development in the evolution of type and didn’t become wildly successful until the early part of the twentieth century.

Sans serif typefaces are almost always “monoweight,” meaning there is virtually no visible thick/thin transition in the strokes; the letterforms are the same thickness all the way around.

Also see the following page for important sans serif information.



Antique Olive Formata

Folio Franklin Gothic

Futura, Condensed Syntax

If the only sans serifs you have in your font library are Helvetica and Avant Garde, the best thing you could do for your pages is invest in a sans serif family that includes a strong, heavy, black face. Each of the families above has a wide variety of weights, from light to extra black. With that one investment, you will be amazed at how your options increase for creating eye-catching pages.

Most sans serifs are monoweight, as shown on the preceding page. A very few, however, have a slight thick/thin transition. Below is an example of a sans serif with a stress, called Optima. Faces like Optima are very difficult to combine on a page with other type—they have similarities with serif faces in the thick/thin strokes, and they have similarities with sans serifs in the lack of serifs. Be very careful when working with a sans like this.

Sans serif Optima

Optima is an exceptionally beautiful typeface, but you must be very careful about combining it with other faces. Notice its thick/thin strokes. It has the classic grace of an oldstyle, but with the serifs removed.

Ever notice that
‘What the heck’
is always
the right decision?

—Nancy Davis

Here you see Optima combined with Spumoni. Spumoni’s spunky informality is a nice contrast with Optima’s classic grace.

Script

The script category includes all those typefaces that appear to have been handlettered with a calligraphy pen or brush, or sometimes with a pencil or technical pen. This category could easily be broken down into scripts that connect, scripts that don't connect, scripts that look like hand printing, scripts that emulate traditional calligraphic styles, and so on. But for our purposes we are going to lump them all into one pot.

Arid Shelley Volante Legacy

Cascade *Linoscript Zapf Chancery*

Scripts are like cheesecake—they should be used sparingly so nobody gets sick. The fancy ones, of course, should never be set as long blocks of text and *never* as all caps. But scripts can be particularly stunning when set very large—don't be a wimp!



Carpe Diem

Decorative

Decorative fonts are easy to identify—if the thought of reading an entire book in that font makes you wanna throw up, you can probably put it in the decorative pot. Decorative fonts are great—they’re fun, distinctive, easy to use, oftentimes cheaper, and there is a font for any whim you wish to express. Of course, simply because they *are* so distinctive, their powerful use is limited.

Party **Potrzenie** **Improv**
Pious Henry **JUNIPER** *Juice*
FAJITA **SCARLETT**

When using a decorative typeface, go beyond what you think of as its initial impression. For instance, if *Improv* strikes you as informal, try using it in a more formal situation and see what happens. If you think *Juniper* carries a Wild West flavor, try it in a corporate setting or a flower shop and see what happens. Depending on how you use them, decoratives can carry obvious emotions, or you can manipulate them into carrying connotations very different from your first impression. But that is a topic for another book.

Today's mighty
oak is just
yesterday's nut
that held its ground.

Wisdom sometimes benefits from the use of decorative fonts.

Summary

I can't stress enough how important it is that you become conscious of these broad categories of type. As you work through the next chapter, it will become clearer *why* this is important.

A simple exercise to continually hone your visual skills is to collect samples of the categories. Cut them out of any printed material you can find. Do you see any patterns developing within a broad category? Go ahead and make subsets, such as oldstyle typefaces that have small x-heights and tall ascenders (see the example below). Or scripts that are really more like hand printing than cursive handwriting. Or extended faces and condensed faces (see below). It is this visual awareness of the letterforms that will give you the power to create interesting, provocative, and effective type combinations.



Ascenders are the parts of letters that are taller than the x-height.

The **x-height** is the height of the main body of the lowercase letters.

Descenders are the parts of letters that are below the **baseline** (the invisible line on which the type sits).

Notice the x-height of Bernhard as compared to Eurostile, below. Look at the x-height in relation to the ascenders. Bernhard has an unusually small x-height and unusually tall ascenders. Most sans serifs have large x-heights. Start noticing those kinds of details.

Eurostile Bold 18 point

Eurostile Bold Extended

Eurostile Bold Condensed

Extended typefaces look stretched out; condensed typefaces appear to be squished. Both are appropriate in certain circumstances.