About Type

How We Read
Since we learn to read at such an early age, we often take the valuable asset for granted. We generally give little thought to how spoken words and ideas are conveyed into the twenty-six letters of the alphabet and arranged on the page to communicate effectively. For the casual reader, this lack of awareness is acceptable, but a graphic designer must understand that our reading habits are formed early in life and are not easily modified.

As children, we are introduced to the alphabet, we memorize the basic letterforms, and learn to read from left to right, line by line, top to bottom. As we mature, these reading habits are formulated, modified, and reinforced until we have formed specific preferences.

Generally speaking, we tend to be very conservative in our reading habits, regardless of how radical we may be in other aspects of our lives. For serious reading, we prefer what is familiar: black type on white paper, roman typefaces in regular weight, and set in uppercase and lowercase. Anytime a designer departs from these criteria, the reader may be challenged.

To better understand the mechanics of reading, we have taken a line of type and split it through the center. Notice that reading the upper half is relatively easy, while the bottom half is far more difficult to discern (1). The eye scans the upper half of the letters and recognizes them almost instinctively.

The more distinct the outline, the more easily the eye recognizes the words. When words of a similar size are set in both uppercase and lowercase, the lowercase words being more familiar are quickly recognizable and more comfortable to read (2). For this reason, most of what we read is set in uppercase and lowercase.

We generally expect to be able to read entire passages effortlessly, without being distracted by poorly designed type or soft-conscious typography. In other words, the type should not call attention to itself, intruding between the reader and the thought expressed on the printed page.

In all cases, when designing with type, ask yourself some basic questions: how much copy is being read, who is the audience, and under what conditions? Reading one or two words on a billboard is a far different activity from reading a novel or a full-page advertisement in a magazine.

Legibility and Readability
Legibility is the quality of the typeface design and readability with the design of the printed page. Designers aim to achieve excellence in both.

The typeface you choose should be legible, that is, it should be read without effort. Sometimes legibility is simply a matter of type size; more often, however, it is a matter of typeface design. Generally speaking, typefaces that are true to the basic letterforms are more legible than typefaces that have been condensed, expanded, embellished, or abstracted. Therefore always start with a legible typeface.

Keep in mind, however, that even a legible typeface can become unreadable through poor setting and placement, just as a less legible typeface can be made more readable through good design.

Esthetics
There is no formula for defining beauty in a typeface or type arrangement, but there are standards of typographic excellence that have been established over the centuries. For example, early typesetters and printers would always strive for the highest level of legibility and readability through careful consideration of typeface design, letter spacing, word spacing, line spacing, and other typographic refinements that will be discussed in this part.

Today these considerations continue to play a significant role in determining excellence in typography. Esthetic choices tend to be dictated by these standards, as well as the designer’s taste and experience.

Appropriateness
Designers often begin a project by choosing a typeface that appeals to them. This choice is highly personal; Bodoni may appeal to one designer, Helvetica to another. Regardless of your choice, be certain that the typeface is not only well designed but also appropriate to both the audience and the project.

Typefaces have personalities and convey different moods. While a single, well-drawn typeface can be utilized for a variety of jobs, there are occasions when specific projects seem to dictate a particular typeface or type style. For example, an advertisement for cosmetics may suggest an elegant typeface such as Bodoni rather than a bold sans serif. A logo for industrial machinery might call for the opposite.

Consider the audience. If the reader is either very young or very old, you should choose a simple, well-designed typeface that is easy to read and set in a large size—larger than the type you are now reading. On the other hand, young people, such as teenagers and college students, are generally more receptive to experimental—or even outlandish—typography.

The length of the copy is another factor: an appropriate typeface for a caption or blurb may not be a practical choice for a lengthy novel or vice versa.

Eventually, through use and experimentation and by researching examples of fine typography in design publications and exhibitions, you will develop an eye for the typographic qualities that are effective and appealing to both you and your audience.

Legibility and readability involve not only typeface selection, but also how the type is set.