Adobe Print Publishing Technical Guides

Typography basics: Typeface classifications

To create a good typographic layout, you need to know when to use and when not to use different styles of type. It is, therefore, important to understand the differences between typeface classifications. Typefaces are classified by appearance and most fit into one or more of the categories listed in this guide. To view the Adobe typefaces in these categories and additional subcategories, visit the Type Classifications section of the Adobe Type Library.

Note: In general, different type styles (e.g., bold, italic, and bold italic) may be used with each type classification.

Blackletter

The Blackletter classification may also be referred to as Old English, Text, or Gothic. It is the style of text used by scribes throughout Latin Christendom during the Middle Ages, and was used in Germany until World War II.

Blackletter typefaces are very ornate and complex, and they can be difficult read. Because of this they are generally reserved for special uses, such as invitations, announcements, advertisements, diplomas, certificates, or initial caps at the beginning of paragraphs or chapters.

In dentibus anticis frustum magnum spiniciae habes.

Decorative and Display

Sometimes referred to as Novelty or Occasional, the Decorative and Display classification includes typefaces of unusual and unique designs that do not fit into the other classifications in this guide. The name of a typeface in this classification often reflects the designs of the typeface.

Decorative and Display typefaces are generally reserved for specific purposes. They are most effective when used at larger sizes, such as for headlines, titles, and display purposes (e.g., in advertisements).
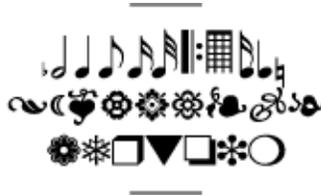
Recedite, plebes! GERO REM IMPERIALEM.

Ornamental

Instead of text (alphanumeric) characters, Ornamental typefaces contain decorative ornaments, pictures, or symbols for some or all characters. You can use these ornaments as decorative embellishments in your documents, or as a way to add pictures to text without importing graphics.

Ornamental typefaces that have been created specifically for non-text uses are called Symbol typefaces. Many Symbol typefaces have been created for specific uses such as, musical notation, map making, mathematics, and publishing.

Sans serif

"Sans" means "without" in French. Typefaces in this category, therefore, are those without serifs. The first sans serif typeface was issued in 1816, but the sans serif style did not become popular until approximately 100 years later.

Sans serif typefaces have a clean design and are very legible for display, special emphasis, and text. They should not be used for large bodies of text, however, since large amounts of sans serif text could cause eye strain.

Senito aliquos togatos contra me conspirare.

Script

Typefaces in this category are those designed to resemble handwriting, with styles ranging from formal to whimsical. The characters of some Script typefaces are connected.

The first Script typeface was created by a Parisian printer in 1643. Today there is a large variety of Script typefaces available, many of which resemble handwriting created using different writing instruments, such as a brush or calligraphic pen.

Script typefaces should never be set in all capital letters and are generally reserved for announcements, invitations, greetings, and advertisements.

Cum catapultae proscriptae erunt tum soli proscripti catapultas habebunt.

Serif

Typefaces in this category, which is also known as Roman, have serifs. Serif typefaces are very legible, and provide improved readability by leading the eye along a line of type. Although Serif typefaces are very versatile and can be used for virtually any purpose, their most important use is for large bodies of text. No other typefaces are as legible for this purpose.

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Ita erat quando hic adveni.

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Slab Serif

Also called Square Serif or Egyptian, Slab Serif typefaces are similar to Serif typefaces, but instead of standard serifs, have short block or square serifs that are generally as thick as the rest of the character. Another difference is that Slab Serif typefaces are not as legible as serif, or even sans serif, typefaces.

Slab Serif typefaces were born out of the Industrial Revolution as a result of the increased use of posters, billboards, and other forms of advertising. Their strong, square finishing strokes are extremely effective for commanding readers' attention and that is why Slab Serif typefaces should be used primarily for headings, advertisements, captions, and initial caps.

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Die dulci freure.

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Transitional

Transitional typefaces evolved from the typefaces used in the 16th and 17th centuries. Typefaces in this category are beautifully suited for text because of their regularity and precision. The axis of the round characters is vertical or less inclined than earlier faces, the s is slightly pronounced, and serifs are thin, flat, and bracketed. These typefaces also have a slightly pronounced contrast between hairlines and the main strokes, and have a flat or triangular tip where diagonal strokes meet (e.g, at the base of a W).

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Catapultam habeo.
Nisi pecuniam omnem mihi dabris,
ad caput tuum saxum immane mittam.

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