# THINKING IN TYPE:
## The Practical Philosophy of Typography
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*This book excerpt appeared in the Type Directors Club quarterly,
Letterspace, in Autumn 2010. This article is © Alex W. White*

Today's typographic designer, working in an environment in which there is simply far too much to see and too much to hear, must act as an editor to reduce as well as clarify messages for readers. This requires critical understanding, which grows from having read the material to be designed and visually editing it for the reader's greatest benefit. It is not enough to be a visual artist, when information is what we designers process.

Typography is not mere typesetting. It is processing visual language to enhance its strength and clarity. Spoken lan-

*Typography translates spoken language
into visible language.*

guage has a few components that add to the message: the speaker's appearance, rhythm, pitch, tone, and gesture (pounding on a table while speaking may indicate anger). Visual language has equivalent considerations. By altering typeface (equivalent to a speaker's clothing), size, weight, spacing, and position, messages are sent along with the content itself. All of that together is typography.

Writing and designing share editorial technique: gather pieces, ideas and fragments, and edit them repeatedly, combining them, throwing some out, until the result is clean and clear. Writing and designing are evolutionary processes in which ideas are refined from the general to the specific.

Type has rhythm. A speaker who drones at a single speed is causing listeners extra work to dig out the content, presuming they care enough to make the effort. By comparison, a speaker who alters her rhythm of delivery, by pausing before beginning a new idea, for example, makes the content clearer by grouping information into sensible clusters. Such pauses in rhythm are expressed typographically by altering a single element unexpectedly and by breaking

*A direct verbal translation (they are each saying "BULL" "BULL" "BULL" "BULL").*



*Comic books dramatically show type's meaning.*

the ends of lines of display type at logical places, rather than whenever a line happens to be filled with letterforms. If a display line is broken arbitrarily or in the wrong place, reading and comprehension are slowed down. If natural line breaks don't work visually, it may be necessary to change typefaces or make other significant edits.

Comic books are particularly good at showing the meaning of words. That the words being shown are *Ka-Boom*, *Bang Bang*, *Kkshhkkkk*, and so forth doesn't detract from the excellent relationship of words to the way they are shown, making their meaning felt. It is more difficult to do this with words that have more complexity. Children's books sometimes enlarge type to represent a shout, and make it smaller to represent a whisper. This rates as relatively lively typography.

Browsers respond to information that has a clear type progression. The natural order a browser will follow is picture-caption-headline-deck [decision point to enter the text] and then, maybe, if the story seems interesting, the first paragraph of text. A balance must be achieved between visual similarity (to unify various bits of type) and

contrast (to make hierarchy clear). Too much similarity and type will look dull and skipable. Too much contrast and a page will look noisy and repellent.

The design process should start with elements alike, then introduce the fewest contrasts necessary to make distinctions between kinds of information. Starting a design with various contrasts at the outset encourages dissimilarity. In the process of design, it is easier to see lack of contrast than to recognize when you have too much. It is also much easier to know where to add contrast than where to reduce it.

Only expressiveness combined with lack of complexity will make the message both interesting and legible. Complexity will not get a message across because, though it may be visually interesting, the message will have been abstracted. Simplicity alone will not get a message across because, though it may be easy to read, its importance won't be recognized.

Poor typography results from misunderstanding the importance of the "not-letterforms" and concentrating only
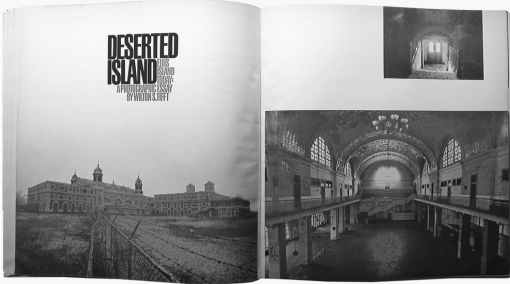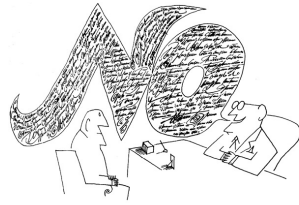
*Browsers become readers when hierarchy
leads them through levels of information.*

*Elegant type reveals meaning
without complexity.*

on the letters themselves. "Not-letterforms," or the space surrounding letters, is seen between characters, words, lines (btw, "auto" is archaic for amateur: always specify linespacing in points), and between blocks and columns of type. It is the contrast of the letterform to its surrounding space that makes type either less or more legible. Elegance in typography is a state in which all necessary information is shown with no unnecessary complexity. It is the distillation of specific content into its purest form. It is, in other words, expressive clarity.
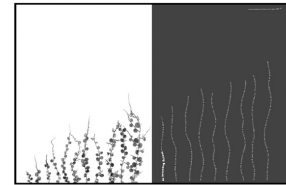
Designers want to challenge the reader, to provoke them and to entertain them. We also want to design on the edge – or at least to tip our hats to the edge – and acknowledge the design era in which we practice. We want to serve the profession and the art of typography. But how? The way to create expressive typography is to predigest the copy, understand the message, and show off its meaning and its importance to the reader.

This cannot be separated from the editing process. Know what the thrust ought to be, then make that point clear through design choices. Contrast type style, size, weight,
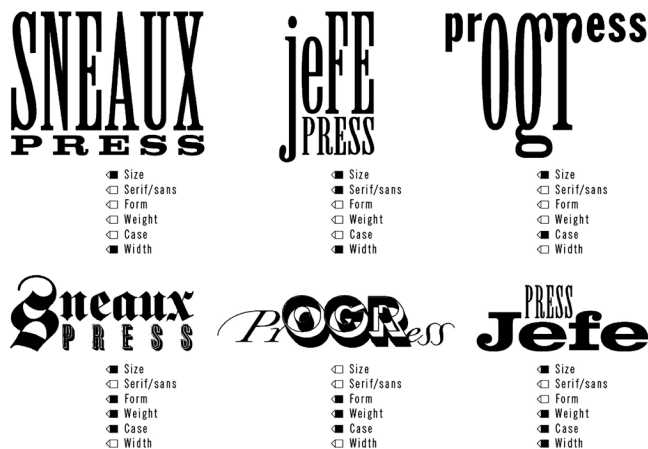
position, color, or treatment to show hierarchy and give enough information for the reader to decide whether to become involved with the text, where the story really is.

Design is a search for unity. It is a continuous balancing act between sameness and emphasis. Parts must look different to express their content, or else a page will suffer from oatmeal-itis in which everything looks like a unified but unappealing pile of grayness. At the same time, the parts of a design must be unified so they make a singular impression.

Contrasting type styles that share characteristics achieve both goals. Introducing minimal contrasts ensures maximum unity while defining meaningful differences. Managing typographic differences is a tool for developing hierarchy and distinctions between kinds of information. Presorting content serves the reader by showing length and complexity. It is easy to make typographic changes that are random or amusing, but it is harder to make thoughtful, purposeful changes that promote the message and retain design unity. Too many differences distract the reader from the work of reading.
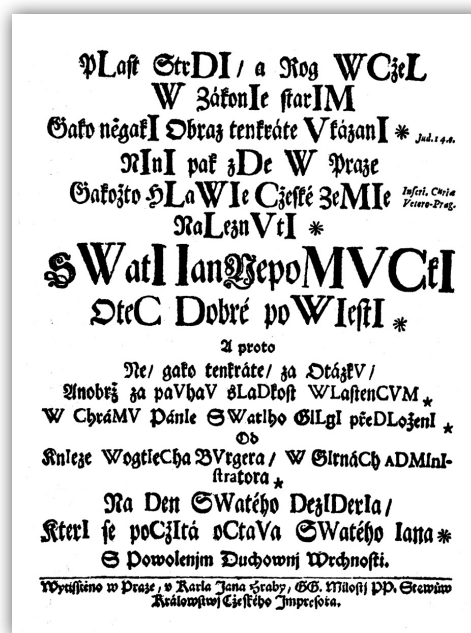
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*Six typographic contrasts can combined to produce very different results.*

*An example of mixing typefaces by need, Prague c1740.*

Gui Bonsiepe wrote: "Design means, among many other things, arranging elements into a whole that makes sense… In typography, order is mainly a question of relationships within groups of elements and the distribution of these elements on a page." Bonsiepe defines two kinds of order: 1) The order of the system in which each type element is a part. Fewer differences between elements increases the degree of order of the whole. 2) The order of arrangement refers to the precise way elements relate to each other and the frequency with which elements align.

Combining typefaces In the early days of printing, there was so little information in existence that display type was unnecessary. Those who could read would read whatever they got their eyes on: labeling was relatively insignificant. As more books became available, naming their contents, from book covers to headings, became useful, then essential.

The earliest display type was simply bigger text. The industrial revolution in the 1800s brought an avalanche of display faces to help make advertising messages more visible. In today's hyperactive information and media environment, readers require seeing immediately and convinc-ingly what the message is, or they will ignore it entirely. Mixing typefaces was a necessity when there were simply not enough metal letters available. Such "emergency" substitutions had to typically be made at the largest type sizes, where individual letters were costlier and fewer. Daniel Berkeley Updike wrote in the 1937 second edition of his Printing Types: Their History, Form and Use, "The problem of choosing types wisely remains precisely what it was (when the first edition of this book was published). Indeed, the necessity for the cultivation of taste and judgment in selection is greater today than it was fifteen years ago, because of the mass of material from which to choose and the delicate differentiations of design in the types themselves.

Background, tradition, research, taste, a sense of suitability and practicality must, as in the past, aid one's choice, and then each person must work out the further problem of selection for himself." It has gotten considerably more difficult in all these regards since 1937.

What is *right* with your type? Because of the constant rain of information on all of us, it is more important now than

# Perfect typography must be unorthodox typography. It may mean doing anything that is needed to improve the appearance of typography. There should be no rule except to make type pleasing to the eye. Aaron Burns

ever before that we design messages with something noticeably *right* about them. Messages must first be seen, so the focal point must startle. Then they must be readable, so information is transferred painlessly. If something is readable, it *might* be read. If it might be read, it *might* be remembered.

Rightness in design can, for example, be audience-specific. Pharmaceutical advertising, long a locus of dreadful typography, got its start in the early 20th century as Patent Medicine Advertising (PMA). Denis Butlin, a PMA copywriter, wrote in 1938, "A subconscious nostalgia seems to insist that people over forty should revere the things they knew when they were young." Therefore, "advertisements are conceived, written and typeset in a style characteristic of advertising thirty or forty years ago... These advertisements, to the people to whom they are meant to appeal, look *genuine*... Hence the psychological justification for those... old-fashioned advertisements that violate the chastity of your morning newspaper." That is a compelling argument for ugliness, which is a legitimate tool and a possibly "right design decision" in the arsenal of an open-minded designer.

Type's rightness or wrongness is determined by the message, the medium, and the audience. What works splendidly for one situation may not work at all for another. But putting the readers' needs first is always a right decision. Erik Spiekermann, in discussing the design of forms, says: "Design forms for the user... Things that belong together get placed together. Leave enough space for the responses. Make the form look like it came from your company. If your forms look good, your company looks good. And if your forms look good, they work."

Type standards, based on three thousand years of alphabetic writing, have developed only since 1450. Typography is immediately improved when any "standard" is fully understood – by researching original source material – and rethought for the reader's benefit.

And remember: a designer can do anything he wants so long as the result looks purposeful.

*(Credits: Bull Bull Bull* Unknown; *Comics* Unknown; *Deserted* Herb Lubalin; *No* Saul Steinberg; *PlexiGlas* Anton Stankowski; *Racism* James Victore; *a, Moreschi, Clock, Spread* Unknown)