

Four steps to making better type

Step 1

Keep it simple

Standardize type specifications and placement to build consistency and familiarity. Your readers are well served when things are made to look more alike than more special and unrelated. Apply one of three pre-made typographic treatments to any story so your readers will see it is either most important, least important, or a story of middle importance. You can make the three styles look unified by using the same two fonts, for example, but vary their sizes and weights.

Step 2

Infuse your type with one distinctive attribute

All you need is one good trait, not many less distinctive ones glommed on top of each other adding up to a noisy, characterless mess. An excellent place to start is to echo design attributes used elsewhere throughout the magazine. Invent a new way to express the existing contrasts of sans serif and serif fonts, their relative sizes, their color, their texture, and their position to each other.

Step 3

Don't decorate with type

Type is meant to be read. Anything you do to interfere with that is bad. Decorating is fun and takes the place of real thinking, but it injures your product by putting form before substance. It is better to develop a system that contains a repeatable attribute and save type customization for truly special situations that warrant such time-consuming treatments, like feature openers.

Step 4

Make type contrasts big

There is no sense in being subtle if the job is to get attention. Lack of meaningful contrast produces an even-toned gray "oatmeal" that fails to attract or inspire readers. For example, captions are often set in italics to set them apart from text. But they aren't made more visible because they are usually set in the same weight and across the same column width as the surrounding text type. Captions are in fact display type meant to lure readers into stories. They are better lures if set bolder and across a narrower width. Leave extra caption column space empty.

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