

Eye for Design: Fun with Fonts

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Times or Garamond? Arial or Gill Sans? Any design project that uses words requires you to make a commitment -- which font? In a previous article, I discussed visual clutter and how choosing appropriate typefaces can increase readability in your projects. But beyond keeping clutter to a minimum, what also makes great visuals? Fonts are visual communication tools, just like images, and if you use a computer, you also use fonts. Making an educated design choice -- moving past the temptation to use the default font of the computer application -- will build your typographic abilities. A good designer understands the theme of a project, knows the scope of their font collection, and can skillfully manipulate the size and positioning of a typeface. In this article, I will help you gain expertise in letterform matchmaking by explaining how fonts are disseminated and classified. Even small projects can look better by using simple font knowledge.

First, where did all these fonts come from, and how can you get more? Operating systems (like Windows XP and Mac OS) offer a collection of pre-installed fonts like Helvetica, Georgia, and Courier. Having this assortment of typefaces at your fingertips is beneficial only if you explore your choices. Unfortunately, even designers tend to exercise the principle of least effort and simply use the pre-selected font of the software, such as MS PowerPoint, or repeatedly use a favorite typeface. This lack of intentional font choice is why we see so many documents in Times, Arial, Comic Sans, or increasingly, Calibri, the default for MS Office 2007. Certainly, many times a standard font is appropriate, depending on the medium. For example, business correspondence would look unprofessional in a cartoonish font and large signs use Helvetica and Arial because of their readability. But if a project crosses your desk with room for creativity, explore your font choices. Computers come well-stocked with fonts, but if you need a font outside your collection, you will need to either purchase a professionally created font or find on the web a free typeface. If you want to be sure it's a reliable font (e.g., it includes all 26 letters!) with typographic features (e.g., small caps, ligatures), it might be worthwhile to make a purchase, which you can do at sites like <http://www.fonts.com/>. However, unless the font will be used as part of your library's broader visual identity, it might be difficult to get a purchase approved for just one project, as prices can range anywhere from \$25 to \$75 for a single font and if you are really enamored with a font, you can buy an entire package (aka as a "family", e.g., "Soho Light", "Soho Bold", "Soho Regular Condensed") for \$200 to \$1500.

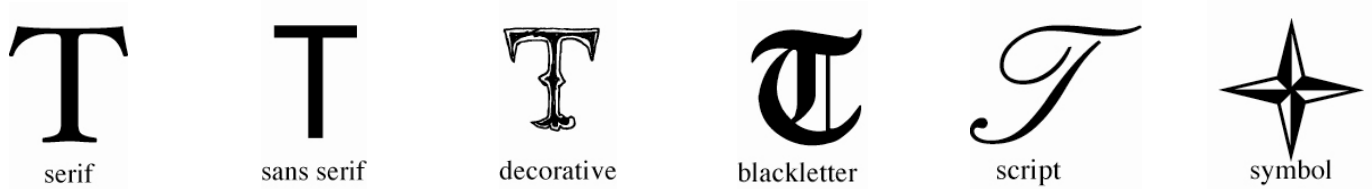
Free Fonts

Budget minded designers tend to like the "price" of free and many sites on the internet offer free fonts. The site <http://DaFont.com> has an excellent interface; it uses categories to organize the fonts by style (e.g., "Cartoon", "Retro"), and you can type in your own text to preview the font. Also, free doesn't always mean amateur, as some type designers just like to share their work. However, you can experience challenges when using free and shareware fonts. The first is procedural -- you may not have permission to install fonts on your work computer without involving your friendly, neighborhood library/university IT folks. And even if you can install the font, you must check the licensing agreement. Sometimes the creators only make a free typeface available for personal use (meaning you can't use it for the library's poster). However, if your use of the font is non-commercial (and it likely will be), it doesn't hurt to ask the designer for an exception. They may be fine with giving you usage rights, with the only condition being you acknowledge their work somewhere in your project. Another possible problem with free fonts is the way they are created. Occasionally only a portion of the full character set is included in the font file, meaning you might have all the characters except an uppercase Q and the number 1. Type designers omit certain letters or numbers to encourage you to purchase the full font.

Classification

While you are selecting which font to use, you may want to consider how they are classified. Classification is not an exact science, but is based in large part on appearance. **Serif** fonts have tails on the ends of the straight lines, like Times. We generally want to use serif fonts for printed texts, as the human eye has an easier time of reading these fonts, due to the apparent connection of the seriffed tails. **Sans serif** fonts are made up of straight lines only, like Arial. Online material is frequently created with sans serif fonts, because the aforementioned serif tails can appear blurry and lessen screen readability. **Decorative** fonts vary in appearance -- they might have serifs or not -- and they are particularly suited to headlines, logos, and short portions of text. **Blackletter** fonts are also known as Old English fonts, and should be used in the same manner as decorative typefaces. **Script** or calligraphic fonts range from having a simple handwriting appearance to highly stylized script you see on wedding invitations. **Symbol** are images instead of letters and can be used for interesting bulleted lists or as clip art. Some symbol fonts are extremely detailed; a few examples you can find online are famous logos, animals, food, or flowers (see Figure 1 for classification examples).

Figure 1: Classification Examples



Fonts in Action

Now that you're not satisfied with using the "same 'ol" fonts, how about some advice on how to make sure you don't misuse the new ones? These two examples show how you can enhance a simple invitation by making intentional font choices and using different members of font families. Example 1 conveys the event information clearly, but the font Times is the only one used. Example 2 is the same invitation using a variety of fonts. The title is created with two different decorative typefaces, instantly giving the invitation a theme. Instead of Times, a sans serif font is used for the rest of the body text. Important times and dates are highlighted with bold and italicized letters. On the right side, the light style of the sans serif is combined with large drop caps

(i.e., that big "S" and big "D") to break up the original text block (note: the actual invitation will be about double this size, so the light text will read well). Creative use of many members of a font family and finding appropriate decorative fonts take the invitation from acceptable to exceptional.

So get out of your font rut and get onto a new road – don't be afraid to experiment a little and try something different. By putting a little personality and style into your handouts, flyers and other visual material, you can help make your information more engaging and attractive, and hopefully more useful to your audience.

Example 1

<h2>Shakespeare the Poet</h2> <p>September 25, 2009 6:00pm Gilmore Hall 2nd floor of Smith Library</p> <p>RSVP BY SEPTEMBER 18 CONTACT US FOR INFO 904-225-1610 library@state.edu</p>	<p>State University Professor Anne Langley will read from her latest publication, <i>The Poetry of Shakespeare</i>, on September 25. Dr. Langley's book discusses authorship of poems attributed to Shakespeare. Did the Bard write "A Lover's Complaint" or was the poem penned by John Davies of Hereford?</p> <p>Refreshments will be served at 5:30. Seating is limited.</p> <div style="text-align: center;"> </div>
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Example 2

<h2>Shakespeare <i>the Poet</i></h2> <p>September 25, 2009 6:00 pm Gilmore Hall 2nd floor of Smith Library</p> <p>RSVP by September 18 Contact us for more info 904-225-1610 library@state.edu</p>	<p>State University Professor Anne Langley will read from her latest publication, <i>The Poetry of Shakespeare</i>, on September 25. Dr. Langley's book discusses authorship of poems attributed to Shakespeare.</p> <p>Did the Bard write "A Lover's Complaint" or was the poem penned by John Davies of Hereford?</p> <p>Refreshments will be served at 5:30. Seating is limited.</p> <div style="text-align: center;"> </div>
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