Letterforms and words

Typography reference 1/3

"Grace in typography comes of itself when the compositor brings a certain love to his work. Whoever does not love his work cannot hope that it will please others."

Jan Tschichold, 1902–74

This information sheet outlines some basic information for the understanding and handling of letterforms: THE ANATOMY OF A LETTERFORM; TYPE SIZES; KERNING; and selecting THE RIGHT FONT.
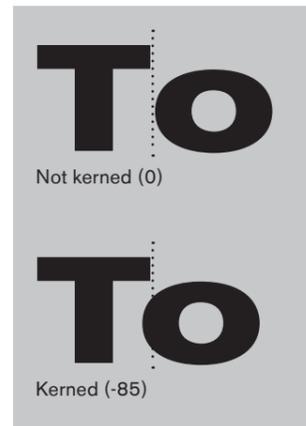
Like any craftsman, a designer needs to understand their tools. Arguably, letterforms are the fundamentals of design, so a basic knowledge of their make-up is a valuable resource to have, enabling the designer to talk confidently about their work and communicate with other designers, editors, proof-reader and printers.

TYPE SIZES

A typeface is measured from the top of the capital letter to the bottom of the lowest descender, plus a small amount of buffer space. The *point system* (expressed as *.pt*) is the standard used today, though most software applications allow the designer to choose other units of measurement: millimeters, pixels etc.
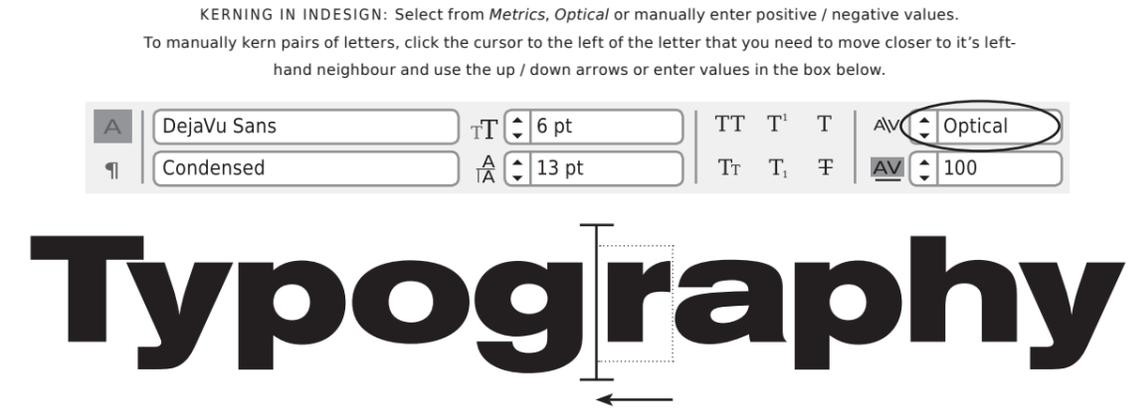
One point equals 1/72 inch, or 0.35 millimeters. Twelve points equals one *pica*: the unit commonly used for measuring columns.

Letters also have horizontal measurements called its *set width*, which are sometimes included in the typeface name: Helvetica 55 for example.

To
Not kerned (0)

To
Kerned (-85)

KERNING EXAMPLES

| A | DejaVu Sans | �T⊤ | 6 pt | TT T¹ T | AV | Optical |
| ¶ | Condensed | A̤A | 13 pt | Tτ T₁ Ŧ | AV | 100 |

Typography

Whilst it is possible to alter type width (and height) through distortion in inDesign etc, this should be avoided, selecting *condensed* or *extended* versions of a font instead.

KERNING

Kerning is the adjustment of space between pairs of characters. By including letter spacing as part of the design process a designer can improve readability, add emphasis and say a lot about the care and attention with which the typography was assembled.

In inDesign, kerning is applied in two separate ways: manually (the designer spaces the letters themselves) and automatically (the software carries out the spacing).

Manual kerning becomes necessary for larger type sizes (such as headlines etc) to improve legibility and readability, whereas automatic kerning can be used for continuous body copy.

There are two types of automatic kerning in inDesign: *metric* and *optical*. *Metric* uses the font's built in kerning pairs (described opposite),

and *optical* lets the software decide 'what looks right'. Whilst the untrained eye will not necessarily see the difference between the two, *optical* kerning does a far better job of letter spacing than the default *metrics* option, so it is good practice to switch to *optical* whenever using inDesign for setting body copy.

Is manual kerning necessary to produce good typography in small continuous text such as this sheet? Probably not: it would take an unreasonable amount of time, and go largely unnoticed. However, there are

other tools such as *tracking* that should be considered.

This will be outlined in further information sheets throughout the workshop series.

THE RIGHT FONT?

A problem that designers often face is selecting the right typeface for a piece of work.

There can be no single solution to this, but by developing (even a basic) knowledge and understanding of the range of typefaces available, and the connotations and aesthetics that each gives

makes this activity an enjoyable part of the design process.

There are many classifications of typefaces that extend far beyond the well-known examples of serif, sans-serif and script. Any visual communicator that deals with words needs to be able to recognise the most basic forms.

THE ANATOMY OF A LETTERFORM

Ascender

Stroke

x-height

Bar

Counter

Stem

baseline

Serif

Descender

Apt

KERNING PAIRS: AC AL AN AO AT AV AW AY Av Aw ac af ao at au av aw ay CA CO CT CY Co Ce DY du ew ex ey FA FG FO F, F. Fa Fe Fo Fu GY KE KO Ke Ko Ku LA LI LL LO LS LT LV LW LY Ma mu NT nu OA OT OV OW OY PA PE PO PR P, P. Pa Pe Po Pr Qu RA RO RV RY ra rc re ro SA ST SY sys st TA TC TE TO TS TW TY T, T. Ta Te To Tr Tu Tw Ty VA VO VY V, V. Va Ve Vo WA WO WV WY W, W. Wa We Wh Wi Wo Wr Wa We Wh Wi Wo Wr wa we w, w. YA YO YS Y, Y. Ya Ye Yo ya ye yo ys y, y. ZA

PAIRS OF CHARACTERS THAT NEED ATTENTION DUE TO THEIR SHAPES

sans-serif
Akzidenz Grotesk Bold, 21pt

serif
Baskerville Semi Bold, 46pt

slab serif
Lubalin Graph Extra Light, 45pt

BASIC TYPEFACE CLASSIFICATION

FURTHER READING

• FONT. THE SOURCEBOOK
Black Dog Publishing
• THINKING WITH TYPE
(A CRITICAL GUIDE)
Ellen Lupton
• THE NEW TYPOGRAPHY
Jan Tschichold